

# *Scaffolding*

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**Illustrated by**

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# SCAFFOLDING

By ISABEL ECCLESTONE MACKAY

ILLUSTRATED BY DUDLEY GLOYNE SUMMERS

*“He’d step on his grandmother’s neck, to get a rung higher on the ladder of success.” How often have you heard that said? This story shows whether ruthlessness in business pays.*

**H**e was one of those men who, in a natural environment, are as unnoticeable as a twig upon a tree. Outside of such environment one notices them. And, for the man I speak of, the Placid Club seemed to be outside. Curiosity stirred to the question “How does he happen to be here?”—a small speculation, but small speculations seem to attract some people, myself among others—a fact which accounts for my acquaintance with Horace G. Benwell.

He used to sit in that corner over there and, from behind a newspaper, contemplate his fellow members. If he wished to speak with them he was accorded satisfying attention and sometimes his company was deliberately sought, but he never seemed to know any of them well. The reason for this I knew as soon as I heard his name. Even I, who observe politics from afar, knew that “Horace G.” was Douglas Fenton’s chief of staff and Douglas Fenton was (with capitals) the Coming Man.

I haven’t used the real names of either of them, for it is the human aspect of the story which interests me, not its political significance. One doesn’t often catch a glimpse of Satan being naive.

**M**r. Benwell, I found, was an easy man to know. That is, all that one ever did know of him was readily accessible. Also he was always willing to chat about his increasingly important chief. It wasn’t until afterwards that one realized how little he had said. He was a discreet man. Outside of his “heel of Achilles,” he was an invulnerably discreet man.

Unfortunately, his vulnerability was of the expanding kind. It began after the third cocktail. He made it a point to stop at three. Except sometimes.

One day I happened to be handy when he ventured upon a fourth. Douglas Fenton had been in, and, after a brief but animated conference with Benwell, had gone out again. They both looked pleased. Benwell beckoned a waiter, was quickly served, and, as he set down his empty glass, looked at me and smiled. There was a subtle quality in that smile which made me feel that the hour was propitious.

“I made that man,” said Benwell, sinking complacently back into his padded chair.

I managed just the right note of interest—and incredulity.

“I guess it’s no secret to anyone who knew us in the old days,” a touch of pique was evident. “But there’s not so many of them around as there used to be. Kind of new about here yourself, aren’t you?”

I said I had been out of the country for several years and that the exigencies of travel made it impossible for me to follow things at home as closely as I would have liked. “But I have heard,” I added, “that Fenton’s success has been phenomenal. I suppose you knew him as quite a young man?”

“Before that,” said Benwell. “I knew Doug when he was just a boy.” (He looked at his empty glass and a waiter brought him a full one.) “’Twouldn’t be saying too much to say I was the first man who ever did know Doug. He was delivery man for a dry cleaning works, Scanlon’s Renovatory, when I first took notice of him. He used to come and fetch my spare pair of pants. Only had two pair in those days, used to wear one pair while the other was getting pressed, so Doug was a regular visitor. He didn’t believe in letting customers get slack. You’ve heard them talking about Doug’s ‘personality’? Well, he had it then just like he has now. I had a feeling from the first that he was a lad who had something waiting around the corner. Mebby it was that queer blue in his eyes. I watched him sort of close and it struck me he had all the makings—if he could get away from his one big fault.”

“He had one big fault?” I insinuated idly.

“Sentiment,” said Horace G. “Sentiment. Couldn’t have had a worse one. Wouldn’t ever run light enough. Always wanting to drag along deadweights—you know.”

I didn't know. In fact, I repressed a shrug. For if there was one thing which Douglas Fenton was famed for not doing—

“I'll give you an instance,” said Benwell argumentatively. “There were two of them doing the delivery for Scanlon. Doug was the under man, taking care of the casual fetch and take. Jim—forget his other name—was on the delivery rig and had a regular route. One day Doug came around looking sort of worried. ‘What's doing?’ I asked.

“‘Oh, nothing,’ says he, ‘only I'm in a kind of fix. Old Scanlon wants me to take over Jim's route.’ ‘What's the matter with that?’ says I. And he just looked sullen and kicked his feet on the doorstep.

“‘You come in here, son,’ I said, and right there I put it to him how he was going to scrap his chances if he didn't pull up. In business, I told him, a man has got to grab and grab quick and devil take the other fellow. ‘You've got it in you to get on,’ I says. ‘And I guess you know it. But you've got a weak spot. You're sentimental. Big business isn't laid out for sentimental men.’

“‘Jim's a friend of mine,’ says he.

“He looked so stubborn I saw I'd made the first pill a bit too strong.

“‘What good'll you be doing Jim if you refuse to take his place?’ I asked, reasonable enough. ‘Scanlon's going to fire Jim anyway. He's not liked on the route. They'll put a new man over you and you'll have lost your first step up—for what? For nothing at all,’ says I.

“He went away with his head down . . . But the next time my spare pants went it was a new boy that fetched them. Doug was driving Jim's route.

**A**fter that he steered kind of wide of me for a time but presently we were seeing each other as usual. There was quite a bit of space in the shed behind my place and I used to let Doug have it for what he called his ‘tryings out.’ He was always trying out something. He never had any intentions of staying with a delivery route long. And, with what he'd picked up at Scanlon's and what he kept learning of chemistry and things, he had some ideas in the cleaning and dyeing line that he thought a whole lot of. I never pretended to know what he was getting at but I'd have backed him any time to get it. And he did. It was about six months after he'd been taken off the delivery and put into the business itself that he came to me with that blue in his eyes so bright it would make you blink. ‘Ben,’ says he (always called

me ‘Ben,’ short for Benwell) ‘Ben, I’ve got something—come on out into the shack.’

“What he’d got was ‘Fenton’s Ready Renovator.’ You’ve heard of it, of course. It’s a back number now, but in its time it was a winner. I can see our first ‘ads’ now: ‘Fenton’s Ready Renovator—It’s a Surprise!’ And it was. It surprised half the money out of all the renovatories in the country and put it into our pants’ pockets.”

**B**enwell supped his cocktail with a reminiscent smile.

“It was over that that I read the riot act to Doug the second time,” he said, with relish. “Scanlon got after him and put it to him how, if this new ‘home treatment’ caught on, it was going to eat into the renovating business—said it would ruin him—offered to make Doug manager—offered him a partnership if he’d only forget it and stick to the ship . . . trotted in his wife and kids, all that sort of bunk. And Doug almost fell for it. Almost, but not quite. I put it to him plain enough that if he couldn’t stand out against old Scanlon he’d better cut his business throat at once. ‘Let Scanlon sell his fusty old business,’ says I, ‘and put his money in our new company. Let him take the risks if he wants the profits.’ But I knew the old feller wouldn’t do it—too old and all tied down with an expensive family. So it jest came to cutting loose and leaving him to sink or swim.

“I won’t deny that I had some trouble over it. But I just sat tight and used reason like I had before. ‘A business man’s success,’ says I to Doug, ‘is like that building going up over on Main Street. It’s got to have scaffolding—at first. But what kind of building would it be if the builder kept on cherishing the scaffold after the bricks got fitted in? No,’ I says, ‘the scaffolding has got to come down. And that’s how you’ve got to learn to look at people, son. The men you use while you’re building up can’t be kept hanging around after you’ve done with them. That’s business and you might as well face it soon as last.’

**W**ell, purty soon Doug was running his own factory and turning out the ‘Ready Renovator’ so fast you couldn’t see it go.”

“And Scanlon?” I asked (for, as I said before, these little curiosities interest me).

My companion was plainly surprised. “Blamed if I know,” said he. “We didn’t stay in that burg once we got going.” He looked at his emptying glass

doubtfully.

“What did you do next?” I asked hastily. The inclusive “you” was an inspiration. The little man cocked his sparrow-like eye appreciatively.

“Well, we could see that there was lots of room at the top in the dye business. Time was coming when we’d want our own dyes in this country and want them bad. Doug said he didn’t know enough chemistry (or whatever it is) to handle that, so he set out looking for somebody who did. And almost at once we run across old Otwell Sells. Otwell Sells, according to Doug, was a genius. Anyway, he was just about as useless as that sort usually are. Not a business bone in his body—and his body was all bones. As for his brain, he kept it up to working pitch by keeping it in soak. Given the proper brand and lots of it, he was capable of turning out some surprising stunts in the line Doug wanted.

“He liked Doug too. Most people did—and do. That’s where that ‘personality’ gets its innings—the thing I’d banked on from the first. Doug took old Otwell and his daughter out of a third class lodging house and set them up in a new little place with an experiment room in the back, all complete. He saw to it that the old man had enough of his special fancy and of a quality that wouldn’t poison him quite so quick and says he: ‘You know what I’m after Sells. Go to it.’

**I**t worked well from the start until the daughter, Martha, her name was, tried to throw a monkey-wrench in to the machinery. She was a pretty girl, Martha Sells, not the fluffy kind, neat and trig, with black hair so soft and fine it fitted her little head like it belonged there and her eyes were kind of wide, quiet grey eyes and her face had every line clear like it was carved. She knew a thing or two, too—educated and all that. But business was one foreign language she’d never learned. And didn’t want to. That girl hadn’t a scrap of the go-get-it, not a scrap!

“Well, she came to Doug and says she: ‘Mr. Fenton, you’ve done a great deal for my father. You’ve picked us up out of squalor and worse, but—’ and then she hit right out and wanted to know how it was that in spite of all her care, the old gent kept getting all the business-fluid he needed right in his own work-room so to speak. All the time she was speaking, she kept looking at me. I suppose she thought I looked nearer like the right party than Doug.

“Doug’s eyes began to seem thoughtful before she’d done and I knew that look well enough to hurry her out of there quick until I could edge in a

word myself. I told her to wait in the next room and then I did some quick thinking before I went back to Doug.

**H**e didn't wait for me to begin.

“‘If it's true what she says and the old man's killing himself with the very best liquor’—says he, ‘we've got to stop it, that's all.’

“‘Do you think,’ says I, ‘that he'd die more comfortable if he went back to eighty per cent. poison—like he had before we got him?’

“‘She thinks he might be brought to break off—gradually,’ says he.

“‘But we know better, don't we?’ I asked him, reasonable as always. ‘And we also know that if the stuff's cut off, his work's no good to us, nor ever will be. That thing you call his genius won't splutter even unless its wick's kept soaked.’

“‘We can't kill him, for all that,’ says he, stubborn.

“In the end I had to give in part way. We agreed to let the young lady try her hand and, if the results were as good, or pretty near as good, as we'd been getting, we'd be content and the arrangement could stand.

“Of course the whole works went to pot, just like I knew they would. Weeks went by and nothing was done. And finally the girl's pride brought her back to Doug.

“‘We're not earning a cent,’ says she. ‘We'll have to go back where we came from. I can get a place in a department store.’

“‘Yes, you could, but if your father is left alone—’ said Doug in that thoughtful way of his.

“‘I know,’ says the girl, and she kind of broke down.

“That was where Doug's personality began to work. I can't tell you just how he put it to her. But the way he put it, it seemed all right. He sort of made it seem as if her father and her father's work were one and the same and, if she cut him off from the working part of him, she was robbing him of himself. Also he pointed out that a certain amount of stimulant was a necessity he couldn't now break away from. It was as necessary to life as air. And personally, he, Doug, would undertake that there would be a minimum—just enough for him to live and work on, no more. On the other hand, if she took the old man back into poverty and left him alone to poison himself



on the streets—he'd die a good deal sooner and less decently, didn't she see that?

“‘Isn't there any *other* way?’ says she, looking at him straight.

“I was afraid for a minute then. But Doug had had a few weeks to taste possible failure in and it had stiffened him. He came through like I'd hoped.

“‘There is no other way,’ he said.

“So old Otwell went to work again and he and me had a little private understanding that when the ‘minimum’ was getting on the short side he was to give me the high sign. I took mighty good care that the girl never could prove anything and, for what she suspected, I let her put all the blame on me.

**W**e hadn't had the old man working for us, under these conditions, more than six months when he got us something that hit the trade right in the eye—yes, sir, it was a bullseye, right enough. Our arrangement was that anything he got while we were staking his experiments went to us but Doug; weakened a bit, insisted on giving them a per cent. I pointed out that, beside being against our principles, this was dangerous because it would make them independent. And if Miss Sells wanted to ship her dad off to a sanatorium—? Doug just kind of smiled at me and I stopped, sensing that he'd got something up his sleeve.

“‘I'm about through with the dye business anyway, Ben,’ he says. ‘It's not the best background for a public man—’

“Well, he was right in that. He always had an eye ahead.

“‘You see,’ he went on, with that queer smile, ‘I've got enough money out of it now to make a change. The dye business was scaffolding, Ben. That part of the building is finished. It's time to take the scaffold down.’

“‘Good,’ says I. ‘Then they can have their per cent. and Miss Martha can shut the old gent up and cure him all she wants to.’

“He looked at me and I never saw his eyes so blue.

“‘I am thinking,’ says he, ‘of asking Miss Sells to marry me.’

“That was a bomb! I can never be thankful enough, that I had sense to be quiet—until I got my breath. For, of course, I saw that if he did it, that would be the end of him. Martha Sells was a nice little woman, but there were all

kinds of limits in those eyes of hers and she had no more go-get-it—well, she hadn't any at all!

“I managed to get away without saying much and, I thought hard. There was a loop hole—only one. Something I knew about and he didn't. Something the old man had let out one night when I was supplementing his 'minimum.' Martha Sells had been married before.

“Oh, she was free enough—as far as that goes. She had no call to name herself by her husband's name. The divorce was there all o.k. But, from something the old man let drop, I had my doubts as to which of the two had done the divorcing.—See?”

**I**saw. And I saw also that the narrator's glass was empty. Would he realize how many times it had been that way? I fancied he stared at me in a puzzled manner as if asking himself whom he was talking to anyway. If the old habit of discretion should close the story now! An almost overpowering impulse urged me to play tempter in my turn. Easy enough to say “Have another?” But somehow the business of tempting seemed suddenly horrifying. That story to which I was listening.—Fortunately, he beckoned the waiter himself, and went on.

“I knew Doug hadn't spoken to Martha yet. And I guessed he wouldn't be in too much of a hurry, as he was pretty well rushed with other things. It was at the time he was expecting the nomination for—well, the nomination he was out for. I guessed he'd wait till he had that off his mind before he took on anything extra.

“Meantime I got busy. I didn't employ any agents. They might be awkward later on. But I nosed around myself. It wasn't hard. There hadn't been any attempt made to hide the facts. Martha Sells, I found, had been married when she was just nineteen years old to Joseph Eagles of Cleveland. Mebby you've heard of the Eagles Art Stores there? A wealthy high-stepper, just twice her age. Within a year he'd divorced her. Perfectly plain case. She'd walked out of his house one day with another man. After that, what happened didn't seem so clear. The second venture must have been even worse than the first. She went back almost at once to her father and she's been living with him, hand to mouth, ever since. Of course, a sentimental party could guess a whole lot if they liked, especially after they'd looked up the private record of Mr. Joseph Eagles. But it wasn't my business to do any guessing. I wanted a few cold facts and I got them.

“Doug got the nomination, too. We had a quiet celebration on that. And it was then that I decided to say something.

“‘I know you don’t like remarks about your private business, Doug,’ I says, ‘but I’m glad you changed your mind about—er—Miss Sells in time.’

“‘What do you mean?’ says he, cold as ice instanter. ‘I have not changed my mind in any way regarding Miss Sells.’

“‘I did my little best to look sort of puzzled. ‘But,’ says I, ‘you’ve got the nomination.’

“‘What’s that got to do with it?’

“‘I jest stared at him for a minute. He’d got my point and I could afford to pull back.

“‘Oh, well—’ I said, like one who wants to drop the subject. I made as if to go home.

“‘No, you don’t!’ says he. ‘I don’t know what you’re getting at. But I’m going to know within the next five minutes. What has my acceptance of the nomination got to do with my possible engagement to Miss Sells?’

**I** didn’t tell him all at once. Let him pull it out gradually that she was a divorced woman. He was kind of grim about the mouth but, after taking it in, he said, ‘I think we can face that. Public opinion isn’t what it used to be on the divorce question. A woman who has had to divorce her husband —’

“‘Oh—if it was *that!*’ says I, surprised like. ‘Yes. We could risk that. But, you see, she didn’t. He divorced her.’

“‘I thought he was going to knock me down. And I guess he did call me a liar.

“‘I’ll see her in the morning,’ says he. ‘And you’ll come with me.’

“‘Mebby he didn’t sleep much that night. I don’t know.

“‘He didn’t tell her we were coming. But she was the kind that don’t need to be told. She had a way of looking jest as nice in the morning as in the afternoon. Not a hair out of place and the right kind of dress and all just so. She was excited, too, about the nomination and it made her—well, pretty good to look at.

“‘Martha,’ says he, without any preliminaries, ‘there’s an ugly report going around about your former marriage. I don’t know why you never mentioned to me that you had been married—except that it really has been no business of mine, up to date. You’d have told me all right when the time came. I know that. Someone has got the thing twisted. They say that Eagles—that’s the name, isn’t it?—was the petitioner. That he—in fact that he divorced you.’

“I wasn’t looking at her when he said that. I felt I’d just as soon not. I hadn’t anything against Martha Sells. If she’d have left Fenton alone, I’d have left her alone. I don’t believe in throwing folks out of the way unless they happen to be in it. And Martha was a pretty girl.

“Presently I heard her say in that nice voice of hers, only sort of breathless—

“‘Well, so he did.’

I wanted to get out then and I was moving to the door, sidewise, when she stopped me. Says she, in a polite way, ‘Mr. Benwell had better stay. You say he knows the facts. Probably he would enjoy telling them better than I should.’ She was perfectly cool. Kind of thoroughbred, she was. ‘Go on!’ says she, with a sort of whip in her voice.

“I did. She’d asked for it. And she got it. When I’d finished:

“‘Well?’ says she, looking at Fenton.

“He’d wheeled around and was staring out of the window. Right opposite him was an empty lot hidden by a hoarding. And on the hoarding was his own name in big letters. ‘Fenton and Clean Government!’

“When he didn’t answer, I thought she was going right out of the room without another word. But—well, I guess her pride wasn’t quite up to it. She cared a lot—and she couldn’t go without one more try. She began kind of slow.

“‘Your—friend—hasn’t got quite all the facts, after all,’ says she. ‘I’ve never told them. But I’ll tell them to you, Douglas, if you care to hear!’ He didn’t give any sign but she went on. ‘You’ve heard that I was married at nineteen but you haven’t heard that I was fresh from a convent school in Montreal. I had been taught there that in the matter of marriage a decent girl accepts her father’s choice. I don’t blame father. He simply didn’t know. You can understand that, since you know father. He had a vague idea that the

proper thing to do with a young girl is to get her married as quickly as possible. He called it ‘happily settled.’” She smiled the queerest kind of smile. ‘He felt that his own Bohemian atmosphere was not suitable for a daughter.

“‘As for me, all that I saw in Mr. Eagles was a pleasant, courteous man, much older than myself but inclined to be more kindly on that account. I did not know, could not have dreamed, that a man like the real Joseph Eagles existed. If anyone had attempted to tell me the first letter of the truth about him I should simply not have understood the language.

**I** do not intend to indulge in that language now. If you wish to know what the man I married was like, there are ways of finding out. But not obvious ways. Mr. Eagles has a fetish and his fetish is respectability. It seems incredible, but it is true. Doubtless he is a little mad.

“‘This fetish of his was the one thing which saved me. I tried other ways. I ran away. I was found and brought back. Two private detectives located me, and one evening “escorted” me right back to my own door—and inside it. There was no place on earth where I could have gone, so long as I remained respectable, where I would not have been found and brought back. But I had reached a point where means meant nothing to me. And my brain, when it wasn’t half mad with disgust and horror, was clear enough. One day I walked out of Mr. Eagles’—er—establishment with another man. We went openly to a down town hotel. I cannot even now pretend to altogether understand the motives of the man who helped me except that he was a decent sort with some sense of pity for my youth and perhaps not without a private willingness to do Mr. Eagles a disservice. At any rate, he took no advantage of my need. He knew what I wanted and helped me loyally. In a few days I disappeared. I went home to my father and might have gone to Timbuctoo unmolested. Mr. Eagles did the only thing possible to a man of high respectability under such circumstances. He divorced me. The man who showed me how to get away I never saw again. But I can give you his address.’

**T**here was a rather horrid silence.

“‘It— isn’t necessary,’ stammered Fenton. I knew that little stammer of his and I was glad I’d stayed.

“As for his nomination, I wasn’t worrying any more about that. He’d seen clear enough that he was up against a straight choice. He could no more have stood for election with that story dragged out about his promised wife than remake Public Ideals. No, he couldn’t. And he knew it.”

I stared at him, fascinated. The walls of the little suburban parlor which held Douglas Fenton and Martha Sells and—Satan fell from around me slowly. Its nameless atmosphere dissolved in bitterness against my lips. I shook myself and rose.

Benwell was getting to the drowsy stage. He yawned.

“That was the last real trouble I had with Doug,” he murmured. “He wasn’t ever as difficult after that. Kind of more shell to him—harder. Jest what he needed. Don’t believe he ever felt really grateful to me though. Don’t *feel* to me jest like he used to. But he’s got on. It just shows that the public likes a straight man. Doug’s straight. Always does what he promises. But he don’t promise much. He’d laugh if you tried to ‘fix’ him. Isn’t the little side things he’s out for. And he’s building up, building up. But where’d he been if it hadn’t been for me?”

“I wonder,” said I.

\* \* \* \* \*

That same week I was off again to the end of nowhere. And meantime the world marched as usual. When I next visited the Placid Club, it seemed the only thing that had stood still. Douglas Fenton certainly hadn’t. He had moved—a long way. I saw him, not at the Placid, but at the Placid’s brother club in a larger city. He towered there as he had towered here. He was building up—very near the top now! But although he had moved he hadn’t changed. He had “set,” I fancied, years ago a face and figure which might become historic. One sees faces like his on old coins.

I had been back a week when, strolling into the Club one night, I saw Horace G. Benwell in his old place behind a newspaper. But it wasn’t Benwell as I remembered him. This man was no longer like a million other men. He had fallen in, withered. He was a man whom some blighting Finger had touched.

“Why!” said I, when we had greeted each other. “What are you doing here? Why aren’t you with the big chief? I saw him as I came through. He —”

Something in his lost look broke me off.

“I’m not with Doug now,” said the withered little man. “Haven’t been since, well, since almost the last time I saw you here. Remember?”

I nodded, and sat down.

“You’ve heard about Doug and me?” He asked the question listlessly as if the answer were a foregone conclusion.

I shook my head. “I haven’t heard much of anything. Just got back from Outside. What was the row?”

“Oh, there wasn’t any rough stuff. Nothing like that. One day Doug sent for me. He said he thought we’d better get things straight. ‘If we’ve got to part,’ says he, ‘we’d better part before there’s any unpleasantness. I had to turn you down in public yesterday, Ben,’ he says, ‘and that’s the second time in a fortnight. I don’t want to have to do it again. It reflects on us both. Better shake hands and end it.’

“When I saw how blue his eyes were I knew he’d ended it already.”

“Do you mean to say he did it—just like that?” My tone was indignant. Somehow, Satan, fallen, seemed only pitiable.

He shuffled his paper nervously.

“Well, you see, Doug has gone a long way since I first took notice of him. He’s pretty well on to the finishing touches now. He don’t need me.”

“Didn’t he give any reason? Didn’t he say why?”

The small sparrow-like eyes grew vague.

“Well, he did say something about scaffolding,” said the withered little man.

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.

Because of copyright considerations, the illustrations by Dudley Gloyne Summers (1892-1975) have been omitted from this etext.

The abbreviated name “Doug.” has been replaced with “Doug” for ease of reading.

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

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

[The end of *Scaffolding* by Isabel Ecclestone Mackay]