

The Crowning Moment.

BY MAY MCHENRY.



DANIEL ARMENT had never had a very easy time of it in his thirty-seven years of knocking about the world; but his was that philosophy of which a diluted flavor filters through to the submerged nineteen twentieths in such classics as "Every dog has his day," and "It's a long lane that has no turn." Arment never lost his faith in ultimate possibilities. He expected to have his share of this world's offerings of bliss as well as of woe, and he kept himself in training to meet either exigency.

When the good fortune began to materialize down in the Argentine Republic, and he saw that he would be able to lift the mortgage a father's folly had placed on a son's career, and still have something left over for the foundation of a future for himself and another, Daniel Arment knew what came next. Five minutes after the completion of the deal in hides he was writing to Ernestine Wilson, of East Aurora, New York.

Another man might have waited to see the girl again after three years, to test, to make sure. But to wait was not Daniel Arment's nature. He would have telegraphed his proposal had it been possible to do so.

He laughed a little himself at the fervor of his love letter. "But the best of it is, I mean every word of it, and infinitely more," he added across the top of the sheet.

And then when the answer came, the whimsical, indirect answer that told him so plainly all he wanted to know, he laughed again. Being alone with the blinds down, he raised the dainty sheet and kissed it warmly. "You damn fool, you have it bad," he grinned, as he caught himself in this act of fatuous tenderness in the sage-green looking glass. Below the surface froth he was

humbly and devoutly thankful that such capacity to "have it bad" survived in him.

The man who had borne the unmitigated bad luck of many years with stoical serenity followed an epicurean instinct in making the most of his happiness.

When he started for New York on the steamship *Havana*, he took to himself the flattering unction that there was not another man on board the vessel to whom life meant as much as it meant to him. Why, it was marvelous with what richness and fulness of promise existence was opening up for him — what joy, what high thoughts, what noble purposes! He seemed lifted to a higher spiritual plane simply because there had been a rise in leather and a girl promised to be kind.

"I tell you, it is a great thing to fall in love with the right kind of a woman the right kind of a way," he confided to his friend, the *Havana's* captain, as they paced the deck under the stars of the southern sky.

All the long, languorous days, not to mention the greater part of the wondrously beautiful nights of the tropical seas, were appropriately employed by the happy lover in thinking of Her — the marvelous violet of her eyes under their enticing dark lashes, the curve of her cheek, the irresistible hollow made for kisses at the base of her sound, white throat, the grace and charm and the subtle, maddening sweetness of her.

Like rainbow-hued humming-birds over honeysuckle blossoms, his thoughts kept darting and hovering in anticipation of that moment when she and he — all the rest of the world blotted out — should stand together in the little parlor at East Aurora.

That would be the crowning moment — when he should hold all his happiness and his hopes embodied in just *her* close, close in his arms! More than once, as he leaned against the steamer's rail in the passionately pulsating darkness, his arms stretched out to grasp the mocking night breeze.

On such occasions he would catch himself up, turn on his heel with a soft oath, and charge swiftly for the smoking room. There he would demonstrate his sanity to his own satisfaction by winning neat little piles of gold from the poker-playing coffee merchant from Rio Janeiro. In case the poker should not be sufficient

check on the spirit of poetry within him, he would follow it up by an aridly recondite scientific discussion with the fossiliferous Harvard professor.

The fifth night out they were somewhere in the latitude of the Bahamas. That night the aridly recondite discussion was especially engrossing. Long after midnight in the deserted saloon the man of learning was discoursing upon the Silurian Age, and the absent-eyed Arment was pretending to listen when the shock came—the crashing, ripping shock, followed by a reeling shiver from stem to stern of the big steamer.

On deck they found the vessel enveloped in a dense, white fog like a winding sheet. For an instant a huge, dark hull appeared beside the *Havana*, then was swallowed in the fog, while a wail of awful despair floated back. Arment realized that there had been a collision and that two vessels were likely to go to the bottom before daybreak.

There was none of the confusion, the shrieks, and shouts, and ravings we read of in descriptions of ships sinking in mid-ocean. There was the sharp, quick command, "Clear the lifeboats," the creaking of rope, the shuffling of men's feet; but with the stopping of the machinery a sinister silence seemed to hang over the doomed steamer.

The *Havana* listed helplessly to starboard and settled rapidly. In the spectral, gray light the dazed and terror-stricken passengers huddled in speechless groups about the companionways.

It was like an evil dream, and Arment went about like a man in a dream, lending a hand at the ropes, helping women with little children. Through it all he was thinking of Ernestine; how she would cling to him, how her sweet face would quiver, and her eyes widen and darken when he should tell of the peril, of the solemn and awful moment when a ship went down in the fog.

When the time came he took his place in the boat. It was the last boat, and it was crowded to the utmost capacity. The officers of the *Havana* had done what they could. They had filled the other boats with women and passengers, now it was for a man to save himself if he could.

They were ready to cast off when Arment, glancing back, saw a woman standing near him at the steamer's rail, her white, dazed

face turned upward in prayer. The deck of the *Havana* was almost on a level with the water by that time, and the higher waves were dashing across it.

To step back from the boat to the wave-washed deck was but the work of an instant. Daniel Arment swung the woman over the taffrail and placed her gently on the seat he had left. Then he swiftly cast off the overladen boat, and stood watching the gray gulf widen between him and it.

Safe outside the maelstrom created by the sinking steamer, the party in the boat paused and looked back. Where the *Havana* had been was nothing but white fog settling over the water like a pall.

