

JUNE

Hearst's

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No. 6. Vol. 27

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 Single Copy, 15c. Subscriptions, \$5.00. Back Numbers, \$1.00. Postage and Handling, 5c.
 HEARST'S 119 West Fortieth Street, New York, N. Y.

"Un Peu d'Amour"

WHEN I returned to the plateau from my investigation of the crater, I realized that I had descended the grassy pit as far as any human being could descend. No living creature could pass that barrier of flame and vapor. Of that I was convinced.

Now, not only the crater but its steaming effluvia were utterly unlike any I had ever before beheld. There was no trace of lava to be seen, or of pumice, or ashes, or of volcanic rejects in any form whatever. There were no sulphuric odors, no pungent fumes, nothing to teach the olfactory nerves what might be the nature of the thin silvery steam rising from the crater incessantly in a vast circle, ringing its circumference half-way down the slope.

Under this thin curtain of steam a ring of pale yellow flames played and sparkled, completely encircling the slope.

The crater was about half a mile deep; the sides sloped gently to the bottom.

But the odd feature of the entire phenomenon was this: the bottom of the crater seemed to be entirely free from fire and vapor. It was disk-shaped, sandy, and flat, about a quarter of a mile in diameter. Through my field-glasses I could see patches of grass and wild flowers growing in the sand here and there, and the sparkle of water, and a crow or two, feeding and walking about.

I looked at the girl who was standing beside me, then cast a glance around me at the very unusual landscape.

We were standing on the summit of a grassy mountain some two thousand feet high, looking into a cup-shaped depression or crater, on the edges of which we stood.

This low, flat-topped mountain, as I say, was grassy and quite treeless, although it rose like a truncated sugar-cone out of a wilderness of trees which stretched for miles below us, north, south, east, and west, bordered on the horizon by towering blue mountains, their distant ranges enclosing the forest as in a vast amphitheater.

From the center of this enormous green floor of foliage rose our grassy hill, and it appeared to be the only irregularity which broke the level wilderness as far as the base of the dim blue ranges encircling the horizon.

Except for the log bungalow of Mr. Blythe, on the eastern edge of this grassy plateau, there was not a human habitation in sight, nor a trace of man's devastating presence in the wilderness around us.

Again I looked questioningly at the girl beside me—a slender, young, red-lipped thing—and she looked back at me rather seriously. "Shall we seat ourselves here in the sun?" she asked.

I nodded.

Very gravely we settled down side by side on the thick green grass. "Now," she said, "I shall tell you why I wrote you to come out here. Shall I?" She was most enchanting.

"By all means, Miss Blythe," I replied. Sitting cross-legged, she gathered

her slim ankles into her hands, settling herself as snugly on the grass as a bird settles on its nest.

"The phenomena of nature," she said, "have always interested me intensely, not only from the artistic angle but from the scientific point of view.

"It is different with father. He is a painter; he cares only for the artistic aspects of nature. Phenomena of a scientific nature bore him.

Also, you may have noticed that he is of a—a slightly impatient disposition."

I had

noticed it.

He had been anything but civil to me when I arrived the night before, after a five-hundred-mile trip on a mule from the nearest railroad—a journey performed entirely alone and by compass, there being no trail after the first fifty miles.

To characterize Blythe as slightly impatient was letting him down easy. He was a selfish, bad-tempered old pig.

"Yes," I said, answering her, "I did notice a negligible trace of impatience about your father."

She flushed. "You see I had not told my father that I had written to you. He doesn't like strangers; he doesn't like scientists. I did not dare tell him that I had asked you to come out here. It was entirely my own idea. I felt that I *must* write you because I am positive that what is happening in this wilderness is of vital scientific importance."

"How did you get a letter out of this distant and desolate place?" I asked.

"Every two months the storekeeper at Windflower Station sends in a man and a string of mules with staples for us. The man takes our further orders and our letters back to civilization."

I nodded.

"He took my letter to you—among one or two others I sent—"

A faint but charming color came into her cheeks. She was really extremely pretty. I liked that girl. When a girl blushes when she speaks to a man he immediately likes her, accepting her softly heightened color as a personal tribute. This is not vanity; it is merely a proper sense of personal worthiness.

She said thoughtfully: "The mail-bag which that man brought to us contained a which, had

I received it earlier, would have made my invitation to you unnecessary. I'm sorry I disturbed you."

"I am not," said I, looking into her beautiful eyes.

I twisted my mustache into two attractive points, shot my cuffs, and glanced at her again, smilingly and receptively.

She had a far-away and dreamy expression in her eyes. I straightened my necktie with pardonable complacency. A man, without being vain, ought to be conscious of his own worth.

"And now," she murmured thoughtfully, "I am going to tell you the various reasons why I asked so celebrated a scientist as you to come here."

I thanked her for her encomium.

"Ever since my father retired from Boston to purchase this hill and the wilderness surrounding it," she continued, "and came here to live a hermit's life—a life devoted solely to painting landscapes—I also have lived here all alone with him."

"That is three years, now. And from the very beginning—from the very first day of our arrival, somehow or other I was conscious that there was something abnormal about this corner of the world."

She bent forward, lowering her voice a trifle. "Have you noticed," she asked, "that so many things seem to be *circular* out here?"

"Circular?" I repeated, surprised.

"Yes. That crater is circular; so is the bottom of it; so is this plateau, and the hill; and the forests surrounding us; and the mountain ranges on the horizon."

"But all this is natural."

"Perhaps. But in those woods, down there, there are, here and there, great circles of crumbling soil—*perfect* circles a mile in diameter."

"Mounds built by prehistoric man, no doubt."

She shook her head. "These are not prehistoric mounds."

"Why not?"

"Because they have been freshly made."

"How do you know?"

"The earth is freshly upheaved; great trees, partly uprooted, slant at every angle from the sides of the enormous piles of newly upturned earth; sand and stones are still sliding from the raw ridges."

She leaned nearer and dropped her voice still lower. "More than that," she said, "my father and I both have seen one of these huge circles *in the making!*"

"What!" I exclaimed, incredulously.

"It is true. We have seen several. And it enrages father."

"Enrages—?"

"Yes, because it upsets the trees where he is painting landscapes, and tilts them in every direction. Which, of course, ruins his picture; and he is obliged to start another, which vexes him dreadfully."

I think I must have gaped at her in sheer astonishment.

"But there is something more singular than that for you to investigate," she said calmly. "Look down at that circle of steam which makes a perfect ring around the bowl of the crater, half-way down. Do you see the flicker of fire under the vapor?"

"Yes," I answered, very tensely.

She leaned so near and



By Robert W. Chambers

Illustrated by G. Patrick Nelson

spoke in such a low voice that her fragrant breath fell upon my cheek: "In the fire, under the vapors, there are little animals."

"What!!!!"

"Little beasts live in the fire—slim, furry, lithe creatures, smaller than a weasel. I've seen them peep out of the fire and scurry back into it. . . . Now are you sorry that I wrote you to come? And will you forgive me for bringing you out here?"

An indescribable excitement seized me, enveloping me with a fluency and eloquence unusual. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart!" I cried; "from the depths of a heart the emotions of which are entirely and exclusively of scientific origin!"

In the impulse of the moment I held out my hand; she laid hers in it with charming diffidence.

"Yours is the discovery," I said. "Yours shall be the glory. Fame shall crown you; and perhaps if there remains any reflected light in the form of a by-product, some modest and negligible little ray may chance to illuminate me."

Surprised and deeply moved by my eloquence, I bent over her hand and saluted it with my lips.

She thanked me. Her pretty face was rosy. She dropped me a curtsey, too.

It appeared that she had three cows to milk, new-laid eggs to gather, and the construction of some fresh butter to be accomplished.

At the bars of the grassy pasture slope she dropped me another curtsey, declining very sweetly to let me carry her lacteal paraphernalia.

So I continued on to the bungalow garden, where Blythe sat on a camp-stool under a

green umbrella, painting a picture of something or other. "Mr. Blythe!" I cried, striving to subdue my enthusiasm. "the eyes of the scientific world are now upon this house! The searchlight of Fame is about to be turned upon you—"

"I prefer privacy," he remarked ungraciously. "That's why I came here. I'll be obliged if you'll turn off that searchlight. I'm accustomed to 'em, and I hate 'em!"

"But, my dear Mr. Blythe——"

"I want to be let alone," he repeated irritably. "I came out here to paint and to privately enjoy my own paintings."

If what stood on his easel was a sample of his

pictures, nobody was likely to share his enjoyment. Of that fact I felt absolutely certain.

"Your work," said I, politely, "is—is—"

"Is what?" he snapped. "What is it—if you think

hands and peered intently through it at the picture. A menacing murmuring sound came from him.

"Satisfying—exquisitely satisfying," I concluded. "I have often seen such sunsets—"

"What?"

"I mean such prairie fires——"

"Damnation!" he exclaimed. "I'm painting a bowl of nasturtiums!"

"I was speaking purely in metaphor," said I with a sickly smile.

"To me a nasturtium by the river brink is more than a simple flower. It is a broader, grander, more magnificent, more stupendous symbol.

It may mean anything,

—

"Do you see the flicker of fire under the vapors?" she asked— "in that fire, under the vapors, are little slim, furry, lithe animals!" "What!" I cried.

"It is entirely, so to speak, *per se*—by itself—" I just managed to tell him in reply.

"What the devil do you mean by that?"

I looked at his picture, appalled. The entire canvas was one monotonous vermilion conflagration. I examined it with my head on one side, then on the other side; I made a funnel with both

everything—such as sunsets and conflagrations and Götterdämmerungs! Or— and my voice was subtly modulated to an appealing and persuasive softness—"it may mean nothing at all—chaos, void, vacuum, negation, the exquisite annihilation of what has never even existed."

He glared at me over his shoulder. If he was infected by Cubist tendencies he evidently had not understood what I said.

"If you won't talk about my pictures I don't mind your investigating this district," he grunted, dabbing at his palette and plastering a wad of vermilion upon his canvas; "but I object to any public invasion of my artistic privacy until I am ready for it."

"When will that be?"

He pointed with one vermilion-soaked brush toward a long, low, log building.

"In that structure," he said, "are packed one thousand and ninety-five paintings—all signed by me. I have executed one or two every day

since I came here. When I have painted exactly ten thousand pictures, no more, no less, I shall erect here a gallery large enough to contain them all.

"Only real lovers of art will ever come here to study them. It is five hundred miles from the railroad. Therefore I shall never have to endure the praises of the dilettante, the patronage of the idler, the vapid rhapsodies of the vulgar. Only those who understand will care to make the pilgrimage."

He waved his brushes at me:

"The conservation of national resources is all well enough—the setting aside of timber reserves, game preserves, bird refuges, is very good in its way. But I have dedicated this wilderness as a last and only refuge in all the world for true Art! Because true Art, except for my pictures, is, I believe, now practically extinct!" "You're in my way. Would you mind getting out?"

I had sidled around between him and his bowl of nasturtiums, and I hastily stepped aside. He squinted at the flowers, mixed up a flamboyant mess of color on his palette, and daubed away with unfeigned satisfaction, no longer noticing me until I started to go. Then: "What is it you're here for, anyway?" he demanded abruptly.

I said earnestly, "I am here to investigate those huge rings of earth thrown up in the forest as by a gigantic mole."

"Well, go and investigate 'em," he snapped. "I'm not infatuated with your society."

"What do you think they are?" I asked, mildly ignoring his wretched manners.

"I don't know and I don't care, except, when I begin to paint several trees, the very trees I'm painting are suddenly heaved up and tilted in every direction, and all my work goes for nothing. That makes me mad! Otherwise, the matter has no interest for me."

"But what in the world could cause—"

"I don't know and I don't care!" he shouted, waving palette and brushes angrily. "Maybe it's an army of moles working all together under the ground; maybe it's some species of circular earthquake! I don't know! I don't care! But it annoys me. And if you can devise any scientific means to stop it, I'll be much obliged to

"The mission of Science," said I

solemnly, "is to alleviate the inconveniences of mundane existence. Science, therefore, shall extend a helping hand to her frailler sister, Art."

"Science can't patronize Art while I'm around!" he retorted. "I won't have it!"

"But, my dear Mr. Blythe—"

"I won't dispute with you, either! I don't like to dispute!" he shouted. "Don't try to make me. Don't attempt to inveigle me into discussion! I know all I want to know. I don't want to know anything you want me to know, either!"

I looked at the old pig in haughty silence, nauseated by his conceit.

After he had plastered a few more tubes of vermilion over his canvas he quieted down, and presently gave me an oblique glance over his shoulder.

"Well," he said, "what else are you intending to investigate?"

"Those little animals that live in the crater fires," I said bluntly.

"Yes," he nodded, indifferently, "there are creatures that live somewhere in the fires of that crater."

"Do you realize what an astounding statement you are making?" I asked.

"It doesn't astound me. What do I care whether it astounds you or anybody else? Nothing interests me except Art."

"But—"

"I tell you nothing interests me except Art!" he yelled. "Don't dispute it! Don't answer me! Don't irritate me! I don't care whether anything lives in the fire or not! Let it live there!"

"But have you actually seen live creatures in the flames?"

"Plenty! Plenty! What of it? What about it? Let 'em live there, for all I care. I've painted pictures of 'em, too. That's all that interests me."

"What do they look like, Mr. Blythe?"

"Look like? I don't know! They look like weasels or rats or bats or cats or—stop asking me questions! It irritated me! It depresses me! Don't ask any more! Why don't you go in to lunch? And—tell my daughter to bring me a bowl of salad out here. I've no time to stuff myself. Some people have. I haven't. You'd better go in to lunch. . . . And tell my daughter to bring me seven tubes of Chinese vermilion with my salad!"

"You don't mean to mix—"

I began, then checked myself before his fury.

And then a terrible thing occurred; for, before I could even shriek, Will had put both arms around that young man's neck, and both his arms were clasping her waist.

"I'd rather eat vermillion paint on my salad than sit here talking to you!" he shouted.

I cast a pitying glance at this impossible man and went into the house. After all, he was her father. I had to endure him.

After Miss Blythe had carried to her father a large bucket of lettuce leaves, she returned to the veranda of the bungalow.

A dainty luncheon awaited us; I seated her, then took the chair opposite. A delicious omelette, fresh biscuits, salad, and strawberry preserves, and a tall tumbler of iced tea imbued me with a sort of mild exhilaration.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Blythe down in the garden, munching his lettuce leaves like an ill-tempered rabbit, and daubing away at his picture while he munched.

"Your father," said I politely, "is something of a genius."

"I am so glad you think so," she said gratefully. "But don't tell him so. He has been surfeited with praise in Boston. That is why we came out here."

"Art," said I, "is like Science, or tobacco, or tooth-wash. Every man to his own brand. Personally, I don't care for his kind. But who can say which is the best kind of anything? Only the consumer. Your father is his own consumer. He is the best judge of what he likes. And that is the only true test of Art, or anything else."

"How delightfully you reason!" she said. "How logically, how generously!"

"Reason is the handmaid of Science, Miss Blythe."

She seemed to understand me. Her quick intelligence surprised me, because I myself was not perfectly sure whether I had emitted piffle or an epigram.

As we ate our strawberry preserves we discussed ways and means of capturing a specimen of the little fire creatures that, as she explained so frequently peeped out at her from the crater fires, and, at her slightest movement, scurried back again into the flames. Of course I believed that this was only her imagination. Yet, for years I had entertained a theory that fire supported certain unknown forms of life.

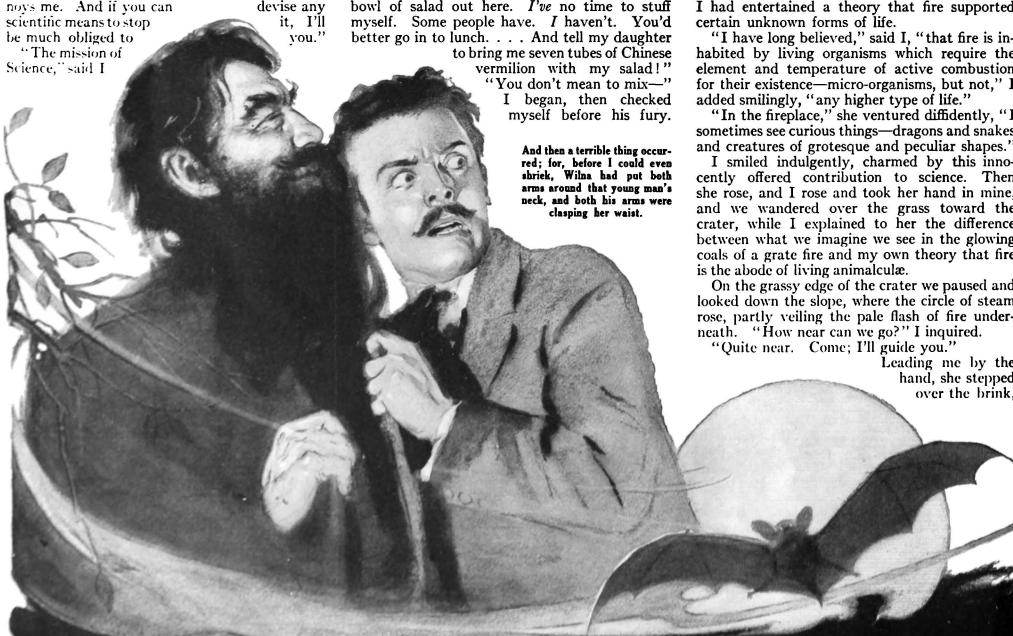
"I have long believed," said I, "that fire is inhabited by living organisms which require the element and temperature of active combustion for their existence—micro-organisms, but not," I added smilingly, "any higher type of life."

"In the fireplace," she ventured diffidently, "I sometimes see curious things—dragons and snakes and creatures of grotesque and peculiar shapes."

I smiled indulgently, charmed by this innocently offered contribution to science. Then she rose, and I rose and took her hand in mine, and we wandered over the grass toward the crater, while I explained to her in the glowing coals of a grate fire and my own theory that fire is the abode of living animalcula.

On the grassy edge of the crater we paused and looked down the slope, where the circle of steam rose, partly veiling the pale flash of fire underneath. "How near can we go?" I inquired.

"Quite near. Come; I'll guide you." Leading me by the hand, she stepped over the brink,



and we began to descend the easy grass slope together.

There was no difficulty about it at all. Down we went, nearer and nearer to the wall of steam, until at last, when but fifteen feet away from it, I felt the heat from the flames which sparkled below the wall of vapor.

Here we seated ourselves upon the grass, and I knitted my brows and fixed my eyes upon this curious phenomenon, striving to discover some reason for it.

Except for the vapor and the fires, there was nothing whatever volcanic about this spectacle, or in the surroundings.

From where I sat I could see that the bed of fire which encircled the crater, and the wall of vapor which crowned the flames, were about three hundred feet wide. Of course this barrier was absolutely impassable. There was no way of getting through it into the bottom of the crater.

A slight pressure from Miss Blythe's fingers engaged my attention; I turned toward her, and she said, "There is one more thing about which I have not told you. I feel a little guilty, because that is the real reason I asked you to come here."

"What is it?"

"I think there are emeralds on the floor of that crater."

"Emeralds!"

"I think so." She felt in the ruffled pocket of her apron, drew out a fragment of mineral, and passed it to me.

I screwed a jeweler's glass into my eye and examined it in astonished silence. It was an emerald; a fine, large, immensely valuable stone, if my experience counted for anything. One side of it was thickly coated with vermilion paint.

"Where did this come from?" I asked in an agitated voice.

"From the floor of the crater. Is it *really* an emerald?"

I lifted my head and stared at the girl incredulously.

"It happened this way," she said excitedly. "Father was painting a picture up there by the edge of the crater. He left his palette on the grass to go to the bungalow for some more tubes of color. While he was in the house, hunting for the colors which he wanted, I stepped out on the veranda, and I saw some crows alight near the palette and begin to stalk about in the grass. One bird walked right over his wet palette; I stepped out and waved my sunbonnet to frighten him off, but he had both feet in a sticky mass of Chinese vermilion, and for a moment was unable to free himself.

"I almost caught him, but he flapped away over the edge of the crater, high above the wall of vapor, sailed down onto the crater floor, and alighted.

"But his feet bothered him; he kept hopping about on the bottom of the crater, half-running, half-flying; and finally he took wing and rose up over the hill.

"As he flew above me, and while I was looking up at his vermilion feet, something dropped from his claws and nearly struck me. It was that emerald."

When I had recovered sufficient composure to speak steadily, I took her beautiful little hand in mine.

"This," said I, "is the most exciting locality I have ever visited for purposes of scientific research. Within this crater may lie millions of value in emeralds. You are probably, to-day, the wealthiest heiress upon the face of the globe!"

I gave her a winning glance. She smiled, shyly, and blushingly withdrew her hand.

For several exquisite minutes I sat there beside her in a sort of heavenly trance. How beautiful she was! How engaging—how sweet—how modestly appreciative of the man beside her, who had little besides his scientific learning, his fame, and a kind heart to appeal to such youth and loveliness as hers!

There was something about her that delicately appealed to me. Sometimes I pondered what this might be; sometimes I wondered how many emeralds lay on the floor of sandy gravel below us.

Yes, I loved her. I realized it now. I could even endure her father for her sake. I should make a good husband. I was quite certain of that.

I turned and gazed upon her, meltingly. But I did not wish to startle, so I remained silent, permitting the chaste language of my

eyes to interpret for her; what my lips had not yet murmured. It was a brief but beautiful moment in my life.

"The way to do," said I, "is to trap several dozen crows, smear their feet with glue, tie a ball of Indian twine to the ankle of every bird, then liberate them. Some are certain to fly into the crater and try to scrape the glue off in the sand. Then," I added, triumphantly, "all we have to do is to haul in our birds and detach the wealth of Midas from their sticky claws!"

"That is an excellent suggestion," she said gratefully, "but I can do that after you have gone. All I wanted you to tell me was whether the stone is a genuine emerald."

I gazed at her blankly.

"You are here for purposes of scientific investigation," she added sweetly. "I should not think of taking your time for the mere sake of accumulating wealth for my father and me."

There didn't seem to be anything for me to say at that moment. Chilled, I gazed at the flashing ring of fire.

And, as I gazed, suddenly I became aware of a little, pointed muzzle, two pricked-up ears, and two ruby-red eyes gazing intently out at me from the mass of flames.

The girl beside me saw it, too. "Don't move!" she whispered. "That is one of the flame creatures. It may venture out if you keep perfectly still."

Rigid with amazement, I sat like a stone image, staring at the most astonishing sight I had ever beheld.

For several minutes the ferret-like creature never stirred from where it crouched in the crater fire; the alert head remained

pointed toward us; I could even see that its thick fur must have possessed the qualities of asbestos, because here and there a hair or two glimmered incandescent; and its eyes, nose, and whiskers glowed and glowed as the flames pulsated around it.

After a long while it began to move out of the fire, slowly, cautiously, cunning eyes fixed on us—a small, slim, wiry, wasp-like creature

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"Un Peu d'Amour"

(Continued from page 515)

on which the sunlight fell with a vitreous glitter as it crept forward into the grass.

I waited my opportunity, and when the little thing came nosing along within reach, I seized it.

Instantly it emitted a bewildering series of whistling shrieks, and twisted around to bite me. Its body was icy.

But its jaws were toothless; only soft, cold gums pinched me, and I held it twisting and writhing, while the icy temperature of its body began to numb my fingers and creep up my wrist, wrangling my arm.

It was I, I realized, it was I that had, and then passed it from one hand to the other, as one slips a lump of ice or a hot potato, in an attempt to endure the temperature; it shrieked and squirmed and doubled, and finally wriggled out of my stiffened and useless hands, and scuttled away into the fire.

That evening I was seated on the veranda beside Wilna—Miss Blythe's name was Wilna—and what with gazing at her and fitting together some of the folding box traps which I always carried with me—and what with trying to realize the pecuniary magnificence of our future existence together, I was very busy when Blythe came to say: "I'm going to paint a moonlight by moonlight. Wilna, if Billy arrives, make him comfortable, and tell him I'll return by midnight."

And without taking the trouble to notice me at all, he strode away.

I thought of her for a few moments, then: "Who is 'Billy'?" I inquired casually.

I couldn't tell whether it was a sudden gleam of sunset light on her face, or whether she blushed.

"Billy," she said softly, "is a friend of father's. His name is William Green."

"Oh!" "He is coming out here to visit—father—I believe."

"Oh! An artist, and doubtless of mature years."

"Twenty-four years old," she said.

I pondered deeply for a while. "Wilna?"

"Yes, Mr. Smith"—as though aroused from agreeable meditation.

"I think," said I, "that I'll take a bucket of salad to your father."

Why I should have so suddenly determined to ingratiate myself with the old grouch I scarcely understood: for the construction of a salad was my very best accomplishment.

"With a bucket of salad," I whispered softly, "much may be accomplished, Wilna." And I took her little hand and pressed it gently and respectfully. "Trust all to me," I murmured.

She stood with her head turned away from me, her silent, restful, empty eyes mine. From the slight tremor her shoulder I became aware how deeply her emotion was now swaying her. Evidently she was nearly ready to become mine.

Tenderly pressing the pretty hand which I held, and saluting the finger-tips with a gesture which was, perhaps, not wholly ungraceful, I stepped into the kitchen, washed out several heads of lettuce, deftly chopped up some youthful onions, and stirred together a savory bunch dressing, set the savory masterpiece away in the ice-box, after tasting it. It was delicious enough to draw sobs from any pig.

When I went out to the veranda, Wilna had disappeared. So I unfolded and set up some more box traps, determined to lose no time.

Down on the edge of the forest I could see Blythe's camp-stool, maddly besmirching his moonlit canvas, but I could not see Wilna anywhere.

Maybe she had shily retired somewhere by herself to think of me.

So I went back to the house, filled a bucket with my salad, and started toward the edge of the woods.

When I approached Blythe he heard me coming and turned around. "What the devil does he want?" he asked with characteristic civility.

"I have brought you," said I gaily, "a bucket of salad."

"I never eat it at night."

I said confidently, "Mr. Blythe, you will taste this salad I am sure you will not regret it." And with hideous cunning I set the bucket beside him on the grass and seated myself near it. The old dodo grunted and continued to dab the canvas, as though forgetfully, and from sheer instinct, he reached down into the bucket, pulled out a lot of lettuce, and devoured it.

My heart leaped exultantly. I had him! "Mr. Blythe," I began in a winningly modulated voice, and, at the same instant, he sprang from his camp-chair, his face distorted.

"There are onions in this salad!" he yelled. "What the devil do you mean? Are you trying to poison me?"

"I'm sorry," I stammered—but he barked at me, kicked over the bucket of salad and began to dance with rage.

I rose from the grass, pale and determined.

"You listen to me, you old grouch!" I hissed. "I'll go. But before I go I'll tell you why I've been civil to you. There's only one reason in the world: I want to marry your daughter! And I'm going to do it!"

"As for you pitiable old dodo, with your old manners and your worst pictures, you are necessary evil, that's all, and I haven't the slightest respect for either you or your art!"

"Is that true?" he said in an altered voice.

"True?" I laughed bitterly. "Of course it's true, you miserable dauber!"

"D—dauber!" he stammered.

"Certainly!" I said "dauber, and I mean it. Why, your work would shame the picture on a child's slate!"

"So you think," said I steadily, "I believe I have utterly misjudged you, after all—'I'm man enough,' said I fiercely, 'to go back, saddle my mule, kidnap your daughter, and start for home. And I'm going to do it!'"

"That's the way to talk! Don't go, Smith. I'm really beginning to like you. And when Billy Green arrives, you and he will have a delightfully violent scene!"

"What?"

Something checked me. I did not quite know what for a moment. Blythe, too, was staring at me in an odd, apprehensive way.

Suddenly I realized that under my feet the ground was stirring. "Look out!" I cried; but speech froze on my lips as beneath me the solid earth began to rock and crack and billow up into a high, crumpling ridge, moving continually, as the sod cracks, heaves up, and crumbles above the subterranean progress of a mole.

Over me crept a horrible certainty that something living was moving under us through the depths of the earth—something that, as it progressed, was heaping up the surface of the world above it unseen and burrowing course—something dreadful, enormous, sinister, and alive!

"Look out!" screamed Blythe; and at the same instant the crumpling summit of the ridge opened under our feet and a fissure hundreds of yards long yawned ahead of us.

And along it, shingling slimly in the moonlight, a vast, viscous, ringed surface was moving, retracting, undulating, elongating, writhing, squirming, shuddering.

"It's a worm!" shrieked Blythe. "Oh, God! It's a worm!"

As in a nightmare I clutched each other, struggling frantically to avoid the fissure; but the soft earth slid and gave way under us, and we fell heavily upon that ghastly, living surface.

Instantly a violent convulsion hurled us upward; we fell on it again, rebounding from the rubbery thing, strove to regain our feet and scramble up the edges of the fissure, strove mightily with the earth beneath us, and moved rapidly through the rocking forests, carrying us forward with a speed increasing.

Through the forest we tore, reeling about on the slippery back of the thing, as though riding on a plowshare.

"It's making for the crater!" gasped Blythe, and horror spurred us on, and we scrambled and slipped and clawed and the billowing sides of the furrow until we gained the head of the fissure.

One man ran in a bad dream, heavily, half-paralyzed, so ran Blythe and I, toiling over the undulating, tumbling upheaval until half-painting, we fell and rolled down the shifting slope into solid and un vexed sod on the very edges of the crater.

Below us we saw, with circumferent eyes, the entire circumference of the crater agitated, saw it rise and fall as avalanches of rock and

earth slid into it, tons and thousands of tons rushing down the slope, blotting from our sight the flickering ring of flame, and extinguishing the last filmy jet of vapor.

Suddenly the entire crater caved in and filled the sky with a billowing smoke, washing all eternity the vapor wall, the fire, and burying the little denizens of the flames, and perhaps a billion dollars' worth of emeralds under as many billion tons of earth.

Quieter and quieter grew the earth as the gigantic worm bored straight down into depths immeasurable. And at last the moon shone upon a world that lay without a tremor in its milky luster.

"I shall name it *Verma Gigantica*," said

I, with a hysterical sob; "but nobody will ever believe me when I tell this story!"

Still terribly shaken, we turned toward the house. And, as we approached the lamplit veranda, I saw a horse standing there and a young woman holding a lantern.

And then a terrible thing occurred; for, before I could even shriek, Wilna had put both arms around that young man's neck, and both of his arms were clasping her waist.

Blythe was kind to me. He took me around the back way and put me to bed.

And there I lay through the most awful night I ever experienced, listening to the piano below, where Wilna and William Green were singing "*Un Peu d'Amour*".