Episodes in Van Bibber's Life

Richard Harding Davis



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EPISODES IN VAN BIBBER'S LIFE

By

Richard Harding Davis

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Her First Appearance

It was at the end of the first act of the first night of "The Sultana," and every member of the Lester Comic Opera Company, from Lester himself down to the wardrobe woman's son, who would have had to work if his mother lost her place, was sick with anxiety.

There is perhaps only one other place as feverish as it is behind the scenes on the first night of a comic opera, and that is a newspaper office on the last night of a Presidential campaign, when the returns are being flashed on the canvas outside, and the mob is howling, and the editor-in-chief is expecting to go to the Court of St. James if the election comes his way, and the office-boy is betting his wages that it won't.

Such nights as these try men's souls; but Van Bibber passed the stage-door man with as calmly polite a nod as though the piece had been running a hundred nights, and the manager was thinking up souvenirs for the one hundred and fiftieth, and the prima donna had, as usual, begun to hint for a new set of costumes. The stage-door keeper hesitated and was lost, and Van Bibber stepped into the unsuppressed excitement of the place with a pleased sniff at the familiar smell of paint and burning gas, and the dusty odor that came from the scene-lofts above.

For a moment he hesitated in the cross-lights and confusion about him, failing to recognize in their new costumes his old acquaintances of the company; but he saw Kripps, the stage-manager, in the centre of the stage, perspiring and in his shirt-sleeves as always, wildly waving an arm to some one in the flies, and beckoning with the other to the gasman in the front entrance. The stage hands were striking the scene for the first act, and fighting with the set for the second, and dragging out a canvas floor of tessellated marble, and running a throne and a practical pair of steps over it, and aiming the high quaking walls of a palace and abuse at whoever came in their way.

"Now then, Van Bibber," shouted Kripps, with a wild glance of recognition, as the white-and-black figure came towards him, "you know you're the only man in New York who gets behind here to-night. But you can't stay. Lower it, lower it, can't you?" This to the man in the flies. "Any other night goes, but not this night. I can't have it. I—Where is the backing for the centre entrance? Didn't I tell you men—-"

Van Bibber dodged two stage hands who were steering a scene at him, stepped over the carpet as it unrolled, and brushed through a group of anxious, whispering chorus people into the quiet of the star's dressing-room.

The star saw him in the long mirror before which he sat, while his dresser tugged at his boots, and threw up his hands desperately.

"Well," he cried, in mock resignation, "are we in it or are we not? Are they in their seats still or have they fled?"

"How are you, John?" said Van Bibber to the dresser. Then he dropped into a big arm-chair in the corner, and got up again with a protesting sigh to light his cigar between the wires around the gas-burner. "Oh, it's going very well. I wouldn't have come around if it wasn't. If the rest of it is as good as the first act, you needn't worry."

Van Bibber's unchallenged freedom behind the scenes had been a source of much comment and perplexity to the members of the Lester Comic Opera Company. He had made his first appearance there during one hot night of the long run of the previous summer, and had continued to be an almost nightly visitor for several weeks. At first it was supposed that he was backing the piece, that he was the "Angel," as those weak and wealthy individuals are called who allow themselves to be led into supplying the finances for theatrical experiments. But as he never peered through the curtain-hole to count the house, nor made frequent trips to the front of it to look at the box sheet, but was, on the contrary, just as undisturbed on a rainy night as on those when the "standing room only" sign blocked the front entrance, this supposition was discarded as untenable. Nor did he show the least interest in the prima donna, or in any of the other pretty women of the company; he did not know them, nor did he make any effort to know them, and it was not until they inquired concerning him outside of the theatre that they learned what a figure in the social life of the city he really was. He spent most of his time in Lester's dressing-room smoking, listening to the reminiscences of Lester's dresser when Lester was on the stage; and this seclusion and his clerical attire of evening dress led the second comedian to call him Lester's father confessor, and to suggest that he came to the theatre only to take the star to task for his sins. And in this the second comedian was unknowingly not so very far wrong. Lester, the comedian, and young Van Bibber had known each other at the university, when Lester's voice and gift of mimicry had made him the leader in the college theatricals; and later, when he had gone upon the stage, and had been cut off by his family even after he had become famous, or on account of it, Van Bibber had gone to visit him, and had found him as simple and sincere and boyish as he had been in the days of his Hasty-Pudding successes. And Lester, for his part, had found Van Bibber as likable as did every one else, and welcomed his quiet voice and youthful knowledge of the world as a grateful relief to the boisterous camaraderie of his professional acquaintances. And he allowed Van Bibber to scold him, and to remind him of what he owed to himself, and to touch, even whether it hurt or

not, upon his better side. And in time he admitted to finding his friend's occasional comments on stage matters of value as coming from the point of view of those who look on at the game; and even Kripps, the veteran, regarded him with respect after he had told him that he could turn a set of purple costumes black by throwing a red light on them. To the company, after he came to know them, he was gravely polite, and, to those who knew him if they had overheard, amusingly commonplace in his conversation. He understood them better than they did themselves, and made no mistakes. The women smiled on him, but the men were suspicious and shy of him until they saw that he was quite as shy of the women; and then they made him a confidant, and told him all their woes and troubles, and exhibited all their little jealousies and ambitions, in the innocent hope that he would repeat what they said to Lester. They were simple, unconventional, light-hearted folk, and Van Bibber found them vastly more entertaining and preferable to the silence of the deserted club, where the matting was down, and from whence the regular habitues had departed to the other side or to Newport. He liked the swing of the light, bright music as it came to him through the open door of the dressing-room, and the glimpse he got of the chorus people crowding and pushing for a quick charge up the iron stairway, and the feverish smell of oxygen in the air, and the picturesque disorder of Lester's wardrobe, and the wigs and swords, and the mysterious articles of make-up, all mixed together on a tray with half-finished cigars and autograph books and newspaper notices.

And he often wished he was clever enough to be an artist with the talent to paint the unconsciously graceful groups in the sharply divided light and shadow of the wings as he saw them. The brilliantly colored, fantastically clothed girls leaning against the bare brick wall of the theatre, or whispering together in circles, with their arms close about one another, or reading apart and solitary, or working at some piece of fancy-work as soberly as though they were in a rocking-chair in their own flat, and not leaning against a scene brace, with the glare of the stage and the applause of the house just behind them. He liked to watch

them coquetting with the big fireman detailed from the precinct engine-house, and clinging desperately to the curtain wire, or with one of the chorus men on the stairs, or teasing the phlegmatic scene-shifters as they tried to catch a minute's sleep on a pile of canvas. He even forgave the prima donna's smiling at him from the stage, as he stood watching her from the wings, and smiled back at her with polite cynicism, as though he did not know and she did not know that her smiles were not for him, but to disturb some more interested one in the front row. And so, in time, the company became so well accustomed to him that he moved in and about as unnoticed as the stage-manager himself, who prowled around hissing "hush" on principle, even though he was the only person who could fairly be said to be making a noise.

The second act was on, and Lester came off the stage and ran to the dressing-room and beckoned violently. "Come here," he said; "you ought to see this; the children are doing their turn. You want to hear them. They're great!"

Van Bibber put his cigar into a tumbler and stepped out into the wings. They were crowded on both sides of the stage with the members of the company; the girls were tiptoeing, with their hands on the shoulders of the men, and making futile little leaps into the air to get a better view, and others were resting on one knee that those behind might see over their shoulders. There were over a dozen children before the footlights, with the prima donna in the centre. She was singing the verses of a song, and they were following her movements, and joining in the chorus with high piping voices. They seemed entirely too much at home and too self-conscious: to please Van Bibber; but there was one exception. The one exception was the smallest of them, a very, very little girl, with long auburn hair and black eyes; such a very little girl that every one in the house looked at her first, and then looked at no one else. She was apparently as unconcerned to all about her, excepting the pretty prima donna, as though she were by a piano at home practising a singing lesson. She seemed to think it was some new sort of a game. When the

prima donna raised her arms, the child raised hers; when the prima donna courtesied, she stumbled into one, and straightened herself just in time to get the curls out of her eyes, and to see that the prima donna was laughing at her, and to smile cheerfully back as if to say, "WE are doing our best anyway, aren't we?" She had big, gentle eyes and two wonderful dimples, and in the excitement of the dancing and the singing her eyes laughed and flashed, and the dimples deepened and disappeared and reappeared again. She was as happy and innocent looking as though it were nine in the morning and she were playing school at a kindergarten. From all over the house the women were murmuring their delight, and the men were laughing and pulling their mustaches and nudging each other to "look at the littlest one."

The girls in the wings were rapturous in their enthusiasm, and were calling her absurdly extravagant titles of endearment, and making so much noise that Kripps stopped grinning at her from the entrance, and looked back over his shoulder as he looked when he threatened fines and calls for early rehearsal. And when she had finished finally, and the prima donna and the children ran off together, there was a roar from the house that went to Lester's head like wine, and seemed to leap clear across the footlights and drag the children back again.

"That settles it!" cried Lester, in a suppressed roar of triumph. "I knew that child would catch them."

There were four encores, and then the children and Elise Broughten, the pretty prima donna, came off jubilant and happy, with the Littlest Girl's arms full of flowers, which the management had with kindly forethought prepared for the prima donna, but which that delightful young person and the delighted leader of the orchestra had passed over to the little girl.

"Well," gasped Miss Broughten, as she came up to Van Bibber laughing, and with one hand on her side and breathing very quickly, "will you kindly tell me who is the leading woman now? Am I the prima

donna, or am I not? I wasn't in it, was I?"

"You were not," said Van Bibber.

He turned from the pretty prima donna and hunted up the wardrobe woman, and told her he wanted to meet the Littlest Girl. And the wardrobe woman, who was fluttering wildly about, and as delighted as though they were all her own children, told him to come into the property-room, where the children were, and which had been changed into a dressing-room that they might be by themselves. The six little girls were in six different states of dishabille, but they were too little to mind that, and Van Bibber was too polite to observe it.

"This is the little girl, sir," said the wardrobe woman, excitedly, proud at being the means of bringing together two such prominent people. "Her name is Madeline. Speak to the gentleman, Madeline; he wants to tell you what a great big hit youse made."

The little girl was seated on one of the cushions of a double throne so high from the ground that the young woman who was pulling off the child's silk stockings and putting woollen ones on in their place did so without stooping. The young woman looked at Van Bibber and nodded somewhat doubtfully and ungraciously, and Van Bibber turned to the little girl in preference. The young woman's face was one of a type that was too familiar to be pleasant.

He took the Littlest Girl's small hand in his and shook it solemnly, and said, "I am very glad to know you. Can I sit up here beside you, or do you rule alone?"

"Yes, ma'am—yes, sir," answered the little girl.

Van Bibber put his hands on the arms of the throne and vaulted up beside the girl, and pulled out the flower in his button-hole and gave it to her.

"Now," prompted the wardrobe woman, "what do you say to the gentleman?"

"Thank you, sir," stammered the little girl.

"She is not much used to gentlemen's society," explained the woman who was pulling on the stockings.

"I see," said Van Bibber. He did not know exactly what to say next. And yet he wanted to talk to the child very much, so much more than he generally wanted to talk to most young women, who showed no hesitation in talking to him. With them he had no difficulty whatsoever. There was a doll lying on the top of a chest near them, and he picked this up and surveyed it critically. "Is this your doll?" he asked.

"No," said Madeline, pointing to one of the children, who was much taller than herself; "it's 'at 'ittle durl's. My doll he's dead."

"Dear me!" said Van Bibber. He made a mental note to get a live one in the morning, and then he said: "That's very sad. But dead dolls do come to life."

The little girl looked up at him, and surveyed him intently and critically, and then smiled, with the dimples showing, as much as to say that she understood him and approved of him entirely. Van Bibber answered this sign language by taking Madeline's hand in his and asking her how she liked being a great actress, and how soon she would begin to storm because THAT photographer hadn't sent the proofs. The young woman understood this, and deigned to smile at it, but Madeline yawned a very polite and sleepy yawn, and closed her eyes. Van Bibber moved up closer, and she leaned over until her bare shoulder touched his arm, and while the woman buttoned on her absurdly small shoes, she let her curly head fall on his elbow and rest there. Any number of people had shown confidence in Van Bibber—not in that form exactly, but in the same spirit—and though he was used to being trusted, he felt a sharp thrill of pleasure at the touch of the child's head on his arm, and in the warm

clasp of her fingers around his. And he was conscious of a keen sense of pity and sorrow for her rising in him, which he crushed by thinking that it was entirely wasted, and that the child was probably perfectly and ignorantly happy.

"Look at that, now," said the wardrobe woman, catching sight of the child's closed eyelids; "just look at the rest of the little dears, all that excited they can't stand still to get their hats on, and she just as unconcerned as you please, and after making the hit of the piece, too."

"She's not used to it, you see," said the young woman, knowingly; "she don't know what it means. It's just that much play to her."

This last was said with a questioning glance at Van Bibber, in whom she still feared to find the disguised agent of a Children's Aid Society. Van Bibber only nodded in reply, and did not answer her, because he found he could not very well, for he was looking a long way ahead at what the future was to bring to the confiding little being at his side, and thinking of the evil knowledge and temptations that would mar the beauty of her quaintly sweet face, and its strange mark of gentleness and refinement. Outside he could hear his friend Lester shouting the refrain of his new topical song, and the laughter and the hand-clapping came in through the wings and open door, broken but tumultuous.

"Does she come of professional people?" Van Bibber asked, dropping into the vernacular. He spoke softly, not so much that he might not disturb the child, but that she might not understand what he said.

"Yes," the woman answered, shortly, and bent her head to smooth out the child's stage dress across her knees.

Van Bibber touched the little girl's head with his hand and found that she was asleep, and so let his hand rest there, with the curls between his fingers. "Are—are you her mother?" he asked, with a slight inclination of his head. He felt quite confident she was not; at least, he hoped not.

The woman shook her head. "No," she said.

"Who is her mother?"

The woman looked at the sleeping child and then up at him almost defiantly. "Ida Clare was her mother," she said.

Van Bibber's protecting hand left the child as suddenly as though something had burned it, and he drew back so quickly that her head slipped from his arm, and she awoke and raised her eyes and looked up at him questioningly. He looked back at her with a glance of the strangest concern and of the deepest pity. Then he stooped and drew her towards him very tenderly, put her head back in the corner of his arm, and watched her in silence while she smiled drowsily and went to sleep again.

"And who takes care of her now?" he asked.

The woman straightened herself and seemed relieved. She saw that the stranger had recognized the child's pedigree and knew her story, and that he was not going to comment on it. "I do," she said. "After the divorce Ida came to me," she said, speaking more freely. "I used to be in her company when she was doing 'Aladdin,' and then when I left the stage and started to keep an actors' boarding-house, she came to me. She lived on with us a year, until she died, and she made me the guardian of the child. I train children for the stage, you know, me and my sister, Ada Dyer; you've heard of her, I guess. The courts pay us for her keep, but it isn't much, and I'm expecting to get what I spent on her from what she makes on the stage. Two of them other children are my pupils; but they can't touch Madie. She is a better dancer an' singer than any of them. If it hadn't been for the Society keeping her back, she would have been on the stage two years ago. She's great, she is. She'll be just as good as her mother was." Van Bibber gave a little start, and winced visibly, but turned it off into a cough. "And her father," he said hesitatingly, "does he —"

"Her father," said the woman, tossing back her head, "he looks after himself, he does. We don't ask no favors of HIM. She'll get along without him or his folks, thank you. Call him a gentleman? Nice gentleman he is!" Then she stopped abruptly. "I guess, though, you know him," she added. "Perhaps he's a friend of yourn?"

"I just know him," said Van Bibber, wearily.

He sat with the child asleep beside him while the woman turned to the others and dressed them for the third act. She explained that Madie would not appear in the last act, only the two larger girls, so she let her sleep, with the cape of Van Bibber's cloak around her.

Van Bibber sat there for several long minutes thinking, and then looked up quickly, and dropped his eyes again as quickly, and said, with an effort to speak quietly and unconcernedly: "If the little girl is not on in this act, would you mind if I took her home? I have a cab at the stage door, and she's so sleepy it seems a pity to keep her up. The sister you spoke of or some one could put her to bed."

"Yes," the woman said, doubtfully, "Ada's home. Yes, you can take her around, if you want to."

She gave him the address, and he sprang down to the floor, and gathered the child up in his arms and stepped out on the stage. The prima donna had the centre of it to herself at that moment, and all the rest of the company were waiting to go on; but when they saw the little girl in Van Bibber's arms they made a rush at her, and the girls leaned over and kissed her with a great show of rapture and with many gasps of delight.

"Don't," said Van Bibber, he could not tell just why. "Don't."

"Why not?" asked one of the girls, looking up at him sharply.

"She was asleep; you've wakened her," he said, gently.

But he knew that was not the reason. He stepped into the cab at the stage entrance, and put the child carefully down in one corner. Then he looked back over his shoulder to see that there was no one near enough to hear him, and said to the driver, "To the Berkeley Flats, on Fifth Avenue." He picked the child up gently in his arms as the carriage started, and sat looking out thoughtfully and anxiously as they flashed past the lighted shop-windows on Broadway. He was far from certain of this errand, and nervous with doubt, but he reassured himself that he was acting on impulse, and that his impulses were so often good. The hall-boy at the Berkeley said, yes, Mr. Caruthers was in, and Van Bibber gave a quick sigh of relief. He took this as an omen that his impulse was a good one. The young English servant who opened the hall door to Mr. Caruthers's apartment suppressed his surprise with an effort, and watched Van Bibber with alarm as he laid the child on the divan in the hall, and pulled a covert coat from the rack to throw over her.

"Just say Mr. Van Bibber would like to see him," he said, "and you need not speak of the little girl having come with me."

She was still sleeping, and Van Bibber turned down the light in the hall, and stood looking down at her gravely while the servant went to speak to his master.

"Will you come this way, please, sir?" he said.

"You had better stay out here," said Van Bibber, "and come and tell me if she wakes."

Mr. Caruthers was standing by the mantel over the empty fireplace, wrapped in a long, loose dressing-gown which he was tying around him as Van Bibber entered. He was partly undressed, and had been just on the point of getting into bed. Mr. Caruthers was a tall, handsome man, with dark reddish hair, turning below the temples into gray; his mustache was quite white, and his eyes and face showed the signs of either dissipation or of great trouble, or of both. But even in the formless

dressing-gown he had the look and the confident bearing of a gentleman, or, at least, of the man of the world. The room was very rich-looking, and was filled with the medley of a man's choice of good paintings and fine china, and papered with irregular rows of original drawings and signed etchings. The windows were open, and the lights were turned very low, so that Van Bibber could see the many gas lamps and the dark roofs of Broadway and the Avenue where they crossed a few blocks off, and the bunches of light on the Madison Square Garden, and to the lights on the boats of the East River. From below in the streets came the rattle of hurrying omnibuses and the rush of the hansom cabs. If Mr. Caruthers was surprised at this late visit, he hid it, and came forward to receive his caller as if his presence were expected.

"Excuse my costume, will you?" he said. "I turned in rather early to-night, it was so hot." He pointed to a decanter and some soda bottles on the table and a bowl of ice, and asked, "Will you have some of this?" And while he opened one of the bottles, he watched Van Bibber's face as though he were curious to have him explain the object of his visit. "No, I think not, thank you," said the younger man. He touched his forehead with his handkerchief nervously. "Yes, it is hot," he said.

Mr. Caruthers filled a glass with ice and brandy and soda, and walked back to his place by the mantel, on which he rested his arm, while he clinked the ice in the glass and looked down into it.

"I was at the first night of 'The Sultana' this evening," said Van Bibber, slowly and uncertainly.

"Oh, yes," assented the elder man, politely, and tasting his drink. "Lester's new piece. Was it any good?"

"I don't know," said Van Bibber. "Yes, I think it was. I didn't see it from the front. There were a lot of children in it—little ones; they danced and sang, and made a great hit. One of them had never been on the stage before. It was her first appearance."

He was turning one of the glasses around between his fingers as he spoke. He stopped, and poured out some of the soda, and drank it down in a gulp, and then continued turning the empty glass between the tips of his fingers.

"It seems to me," he said, "that it is a great pity." He looked up interrogatively at the other, but Mr. Caruthers met his glance without any returning show of interest. "I say," repeated Van Bibber—"I say it seems a pity that a child like that should be allowed to go on in that business. A grown woman can go into it with her eyes open, or a girl who has had decent training can too. But it's different with a child. She has no choice in the matter; they don't ask her permission; and she isn't old enough to know what it means; and she gets used to it and fond of it before she grows to know what the danger is. And then it's too late. It seemed to me that if there was any one who had a right to stop it, it would be a very good thing to let that person know about her—about this child, I mean; the one who made the hit—before it was too late. It seems to me a responsibility I wouldn't care to take myself. I wouldn't care to think that I had the chance to stop it, and had let the chance go by. You know what the life is, and what the temptation a woman—" Van Bibber stopped with a gasp of concern, and added, hurriedly, "I mean we all know—every man knows."

Mr. Caruthers was looking at him with his lips pressed closely together, and his eyebrows drawn into the shape of the letter V. He leaned forward, and looked at Van Bibber intently.

"What is all this about?" he asked. "Did you come here, Mr. Van Bibber, simply to tell me this? What have you to do with it? What have I to do with it? Why did you come?"

"Because of the child."

"What child?"

"Your child," said Van Bibber.

Young Van Bibber was quite prepared for an outbreak of some sort, and mentally braced himself to receive it. He rapidly assured himself that this man had every reason to be angry, and that he, if he meant to accomplish anything, had every reason to be considerate and patient. So he faced Mr. Caruthers with shoulders squared, as though it were a physical shock he had to stand against, and in consequence he was quite unprepared for what followed. For Mr. Caruthers raised his face without a trace of feeling in it, and, with his eyes still fixed on the glass in his hand, set it carefully down on the mantel beside him, and girded himself about with the rope of his robe. When he spoke, it was in a tone of quiet politeness.

"Mr. Van Bibber," he began, "you are a very brave young man. You have dared to say to me what those who are my best friends—what even my own family—would not care to say. They are afraid it might hurt me, I suppose. They have some absurd regard for my feelings; they hesitate to touch upon a subject which in no way concerns them, and which they know must be very painful to me. But you have the courage of your convictions; you have no compunctions about tearing open old wounds; and you come here, unasked and uninvited, to let me know what you think of my conduct, to let me understand that it does not agree with your own ideas of what I ought to do, and to tell me how I, who am old enough to be your father, should behave. You have rushed in where angels fear to tread, Mr. Van Bibber, to show me the error of my ways. I suppose I ought to thank you for it; but I have always said that it is not the wicked people who are to be feared in this world, or who do the most harm. We know them; we can prepare for them, and checkmate them. It is the well-meaning fool who makes all the trouble. For no one knows him until he discloses himself, and the mischief is done before he can be stopped. I think, if you will allow me to say so, that you have demonstrated my theory pretty thoroughly, and have done about as much needless harm for one evening as you can possibly wish. And so, if

you will excuse me," he continued, sternly, and moving from his place, "I will ask to say good-night, and will request of you that you grow older and wiser and much more considerate before you come to see me again."

Van Bibber had flushed at Mr. Caruthers's first words, and had then grown somewhat pale, and straightened himself visibly. He did not move when the elder man had finished, but cleared his throat, and then spoke with some little difficulty. "It is very easy to call a man a fool," he said, slowly, "but it is much harder to be called a fool and not to throw the other man out of the window. But that, you see, would not do any good, and I have something to say to you first. I am quite clear in my own mind as to my position, and I am not going to allow anything you have said or can say to annoy me much until I am through. There will be time enough to resent it then. I am quite well aware that I did an unconventional thing in coming here—a bold thing or a foolish thing, as you choose—but the situation is pretty bad, and I did as I would have wished to be done by if I had had a child going to the devil and didn't know it. I should have been glad to learn of it even from a stranger. However," he said, smiling grimly, and pulling his cape about him, "there are other kindly disposed people in the world besides fathers. There is an aunt, perhaps, or an uncle or two; and sometimes, even to-day, there is the chance Samaritan."

Van Bibber picked up his high hat from the table, looked into it critically, and settled it on his head. "Good-night," he said, and walked slowly towards the door. He had his hand on the knob, when Mr. Caruthers raised his head.

"Wait just one minute, please, Mr. Van Bibber?" asked Mr. Caruthers.

Van Bibber stopped with a prompt obedience which would have led one to conclude that he might have put on his hat only to precipitate matters.

"Before you go," said Mr. Caruthers, grudgingly, "I want to say—I want you to understand my position."

"Oh, that's all right," said Van Bibber, lightly, opening the door.

"No, it is not all right. One moment, please. I do not intend that you shall go away from here with the idea that you have tried to do me a service, and that I have been unable to appreciate it, and that you are a much-abused and much-misunderstood young man. Since you have done me the honor to make my affairs your business, I would prefer that you should understand them fully. I do not care to have you discuss my conduct at clubs and afternoon teas with young women until you—"

Van Bibber drew in his breath sharply, with a peculiar whistling sound, and opened and shut his hands. "Oh, I wouldn't say that if I were you," he said, simply.

"I beg your pardon," the older man said, quickly. "That was a mistake. I was wrong. I beg your pardon. But you have tried me very sorely. You have intruded upon a private trouble that you ought to know must be very painful to me. But I believe you meant well. I know you to be a gentleman, and I am willing to think you acted on impulse, and that you will see to-morrow what a mistake you have made. It is not a thing I talk about; I do not speak of it to my friends, and they are far too considerate to speak of it to me. But you have put me on the defensive. You have made me out more or less of a brute, and I don't intend to be so far misunderstood. There are two sides to every story, and there is something to be said about this, even for me."

He walked back to his place beside the mantel, and put his shoulders against it, and faced Van Bibber, with his fingers twisted in the cord around his waist.

"When I married," said Mr. Caruthers, "I did so against the wishes of my people and the advice of all my friends. You know all about that. God help us! who doesn't?" he added, bitterly. "It was very rich, rare reading

for you and for every one else who saw the daily papers, and we gave them all they wanted of it. I took her out of that life and married her because I believed she was as good a woman as any of those who had never had to work for their living, and I was bound that my friends and your friends should recognize her and respect her as my wife had a right to be respected; and I took her abroad that I might give all you sensitive, fine people a chance to get used to the idea of being polite to a woman who had once been a burlesque actress. It began over there in Paris. What I went through then no one knows; but when I came back—and I would never have come back if she had not made me—it was my friends I had to consider, and not her. It was in the blood; it was in the life she had led, and in the life men like you and me had taught her to live. And it had to come out."

The muscles of Mr. Caruthers's face were moving, and beyond his control; but Van Bibber did not see this, for he was looking intently out of the window, over the roofs of the city.

"She had every chance when she married me that a woman ever had," continued the older man. "It only depended on herself. I didn't try to make a housewife of her or a drudge. She had all the healthy excitement and all the money she wanted, and she had a home here ready for her whenever she was tired of travelling about and wished to settle down. And I was—and a husband that loved her as—she had everything—everything that a man's whole thought and love and money could bring to her. And you know what she did."

He looked at Van Bibber, but Van Bibber's eyes were still turned towards the open window and the night.

"And after the divorce—and she was free to go where she pleased, and to live as she pleased and with whom she pleased, without bringing disgrace on a husband who honestly loved her—I swore to my God that I would never see her nor her child again. And I never saw her again, not even when she died. I loved the mother, and she deceived me and

disgraced me and broke my heart, and I only wish she had killed me; and I was beginning to love her child, and I vowed she should not live to trick me too. I had suffered as no man I know had suffered; in a way a boy like you cannot understand, and that no one can understand who has not gone to hell and been forced to live after it. And was I to go through that again? Was I to love and care for and worship this child, and have her grow up with all her mother's vanity and animal nature, and have her turn on me some day and show me that what is bred in the bone must tell, and that I was a fool again—a pitiful fond fool? I could not trust her. I can never trust any woman or child again, and least of all that woman's child. She is as dead to me as though she were buried with her mother, and it is nothing to me what she is or what her life is. I know in time what it will be. She has begun earlier than I had supposed, that is all; but she is nothing to me." The man stopped and turned his back to Van Bibber, and hid his head in his hands, with his elbows on the mantelpiece. "I care too much," he said. "I cannot let it mean anything to me; when I do care, it means so much more to me than to other men. They may pretend to laugh and to forget and to outgrow it, but it is not so with me. It means too much." He took a quick stride towards one of the arm-chairs, and threw himself into it. "Why, man," he cried, "I loved that child's mother to the day of her death. I loved that woman then, and, God help me! I love that woman still."

He covered his face with his hands, and sat leaning forward and breathing heavily as he rocked himself to and fro. Van Bibber still stood looking gravely out at the lights that picketed the black surface of the city. He was to all appearances as unmoved by the outburst of feeling into which the older man had been surprised as though it had been something in a play. There was an unbroken silence for a moment, and then it was Van Bibber who was the first to speak.

"I came here, as you say, on impulse," he said; "but I am glad I came, for I have your decisive answer now about the little girl. I have been thinking," he continued, slowly, "since you have been speaking, and

before, when I first saw her dancing in front of the footlights, when I did not know who she was, that I could give up a horse or two, if necessary, and support this child instead. Children are worth more than horses, and a man who saves a soul, as it says"—he flushed slightly, and looked up with a hesitating, deprecatory smile—"somewhere, wipes out a multitude of sins. And it may be I'd like to try and get rid of some of mine. I know just where to send her; I know the very place. It's down in Evergreen Bay, on Long Island. They are tenants of mine there, and very nice farm sort of people, who will be very good to her. They wouldn't know anything about her, and she'd forget what little she knows of this present life very soon, and grow up with the other children to be one of them; and then, when she gets older and becomes a young lady, she could go to some school—but that's a bit too far ahead to plan for the present; but that's what I am going to do, though," said the young man, confidently, and as though speaking to himself. "That theatrical boarding-house person could be bought off easily enough," he went on, quickly, "and Lester won't mind letting her go if I ask it,—and—and that's what I'll do. As you say, it's a good deal of an experiment, but I think I'll run the risk."

He walked quickly to the door and disappeared in the hall, and then came back, kicking the door open as he returned, and holding the child in his arms.

"This is she," he said, quietly. He did not look at or notice the father, but stood, with the child asleep in the bend of his left arm, gazing down at her. "This is she," he repeated; "this is your child."

There was something cold and satisfied in Van Bibber's tone and manner, as though he were congratulating himself upon the engaging of a new groom; something that placed the father entirely outside of it. He might have been a disinterested looker-on.

"She will need to be fed a bit," Van Bibber ran on, cheerfully. "They did not treat her very well, I fancy. She is thin and peaked and tired-looking." He drew up the loose sleeve of her jacket, and showed the bare

forearm to the light. He put his thumb and little finger about it, and closed them on it gently. "It is very thin," he said. "And under her eyes, if it were not for the paint," he went on, mercilessly, "you could see how deep the lines are. This red spot on her cheek," he said, gravely, "is where Mary Vane kissed her to-night, and this is where Alma Stantley kissed her, and that Lee girl. You have heard of them, perhaps. They will never kiss her again. She is going to grow up a sweet, fine, beautiful woman—are you not?" he said, gently drawing the child higher up on his shoulder, until her face touched his, and still keeping his eyes from the face of the older man. "She does not look like her mother," he said; "she has her father's auburn hair and straight nose and finer-cut lips and chin. She looks very much like her father. It seems a pity," he added, abruptly. "She will grow up," he went on, "without knowing him, or who he is—or was, if he should die. She will never speak with him, or see him, or take his hand. She may pass him some day on the street and will not know him, and he will not know her, but she will grow to be very fond and to be very grateful to the simple, kindhearted old people who will have cared for her when she was a little girl."

The child in his arms stirred, shivered slightly, and awoke. The two men watched her breathlessly, with silent intentness. She raised her head and stared around the unfamiliar room doubtfully, then turned to where her father stood, looking at him a moment, and passed him by; and then, looking up into Van Bibber's face, recognized him, and gave a gentle, sleepy smile, and, with a sigh of content and confidence, drew her arm up closer around his neck, and let her head fall back upon his breast.

The father sprang to his feet with a quick, jealous gasp of pain. "Give her to me!" he said, fiercely, under his breath, snatching her out of Van Bibber's arms. "She is mine; give her to me!"

Van Bibber closed the door gently behind him, and went jumping down the winding stairs of the Berkeley three steps at a time.

And an hour later, when the English servant came to his master's door, he found him still awake and sitting in the dark by the open window, holding something in his arms and looking out over the sleeping city.

"James," he said, "you can make up a place for me here on the lounge. Miss Caruthers, my daughter, will sleep in my room to-night."

Van Bibber's Man Servant

Van Bibber's man Walters was the envy and admiration of his friends. He was English, of course, and he had been trained in the household of the Marquis Bendinot, and had travelled, in his younger days, as the valet of young Lord Upton. He was now rather well on in years, although it would have been impossible to say just how old he was. Walters had a dignified and repellent air about him, and he brushed his hair in such a way as to conceal his baldness.

And when a smirking, slavish youth with red checks and awkward gestures turned up in Van Bibber's livery, his friends were naturally surprised, and asked how he had come to lose Walters. Van Bibber could not say exactly, at least he could not rightly tell whether he had dismissed Walters or Walters had dismissed himself. The facts of the unfortunate separation were like this:

Van Bibber gave a great many dinners during the course of the season at Delmonico's, dinners hardly formal enough to require a private room, and yet too important to allow of his running the risk of keeping his guests standing in the hall waiting for a vacant table. So he conceived the idea of sending Walters over about half-past six to keep a table for him. As everybody knows, you can hold a table yourself at Delmonico's for

any length of time until the other guests arrive, but the rule is very strict about servants. Because, as the head waiter will tell you, if servants were allowed to reserve a table during the big rush at seven o'clock, why not messenger boys? And it would certainly never do to have half a dozen large tables securely held by minute messengers while the hungry and impatient waited their turn at the door.

But Walters looked as much like a gentleman as did many of the diners; and when he seated himself at the largest table and told the waiter to serve for a party of eight or ten, he did it with such an air that the head waiter came over himself and took the orders. Walters knew quite as much about ordering a dinner as did his master; and when Van Bibber was too tired to make out the menu, Walters would look over the card himself and order the proper wines and side dishes; and with such a carelessly severe air and in such a masterly manner did he discharge this high function that the waiters looked upon him with much respect.

But respect even from your equals and the satisfaction of having your fellow-servants mistake you for a member of the Few Hundred are not enough. Walters wanted more. He wanted the further satisfaction of enjoying the delicious dishes he had ordered; of sitting as a coequal with the people for whom he had kept a place; of completing the deception he practised only up to the point where it became most interesting.

It certainly was trying to have to rise with a subservient and unobtrusive bow and glide out unnoticed by the real guests when they arrived; to have to relinquish the feast just when the feast should begin. It would not be pleasant, certainly, to sit for an hour at a big empty table, ordering dishes fit only for epicures, and then, just as the waiters bore down with the Little Neck clams, so nicely iced and so cool and bitter-looking, to have to rise and go out into the street to a table d'hote around the corner.

This was Walters's state of mind when Mr. Van Bibber told him for the hundredth time to keep a table for him for three at Delmonico's. Walters wrapped his severe figure in a frock-coat and brushed his hair, and allowed himself the dignity of a walking-stick. He would have liked to act as a substitute in an evening dress-suit, but Van Bibber would not have allowed it. So Walters walked over to Delmonico's and took a table near a window, and said that the other gentlemen would arrive later. Then he looked at his watch and ordered the dinner. It was just the sort of dinner he would have ordered had he ordered it for himself at some one else's expense. He suggested Little Neck clams first, with Chablis, and pea-soup, and caviare on toast, before the oyster crabs, with Johannisberger Cabinet; then an entree of calves' brains and rice; then no roast, but a bird, cold asparagus with French dressing, Camembert cheese, and Turkish coffee. As there were to be no women, he omitted the sweets and added three other wines to follow the white wine. It struck him as a particularly well-chosen dinner, and the longer he sat and thought about it the more he wished he were to test its excellence. And then the people all around him were so bright and happy, and seemed to be enjoying what they had ordered with such a refinement of zest that he felt he would give a great deal could he just sit there as one of them for a brief hour.

At that moment the servant deferentially handed him a note which a messenger boy had brought. It said:

> "Dinner off called out town send clothes and things after me to Young's Boston."
>
> "VAN BIBBER."

Walters rose involuntarily, and then sat still to think about it. He would have to countermand the dinner which he had ordered over half an hour before, and he would have to explain who he was to those other

servants who had always regarded him as such a great gentleman. It was very hard.

And then Walters was tempted. He was a very good servant, and he knew his place as only an English servant can, and he had always accepted it, but to-night he was tempted—and he fell. He met the waiter's anxious look with a grave smile.

"The other gentlemen will not be with me to-night," he said, glancing at the note. "But I will dine here as I intended. You can serve for one."

That was perhaps the proudest night in the history of Walters. He had always felt that he was born out of his proper sphere, and to-night he was assured of it. He was a little nervous at first, lest some of Van Bibber's friends should come in and recognize him; but as the dinner progressed and the warm odor of the dishes touched his sense, and the rich wines ran through his veins, and the women around him smiled and bent and moved like beautiful birds of beautiful plumage, he became content, grandly content; and he half closed his eyes and imagined he was giving a dinner to everybody in the place. Vain and idle thoughts came to him and went again, and he eyed the others about him calmly and with polite courtesy, as they did him, and he felt that if he must later pay for this moment it was worth the paying.

Then he gave the waiter a couple of dollars out of his own pocket and wrote Van Bibber's name on the check, and walked in state into the cafe, where he ordered a green mint and a heavy, black, and expensive cigar, and seated himself at the window, where he felt that he should always have sat if the fates had been just. The smoke hung in light clouds about him, and the lights shone and glistened on the white cloths and the broad shirt-fronts of the smart young men and distinguished foreign-looking older men at the surrounding tables.

And then, in the midst of his dreamings, he heard the soft, careless drawl of his master, which sounded at that time and in that place like the awful voice of a condemning judge. Van Bibber pulled out a chair and dropped into it. His side was towards Walters, so that he did not see him. He had some men with him, and he was explaining how he had missed his train and had come back to find that one of the party had eaten the dinner without him, and he wondered who it could be; and then turning easily in his seat he saw Walters with the green mint and the cigar, trembling behind a copy of the London Graphic.

"Walters!" said Van Bibber, "what are you doing here?"

Walters looked his guilt and rose stiffly. He began with a feeble "If you please, sir—"

"Go back to my rooms and wait for me there," said Van Bibber, who was too decent a fellow to scold a servant in public.

Walters rose and left the half-finished cigar and the mint with the ice melting in it on the table. His one evening of sublimity was over, and he walked away, bending before the glance of his young master and the smiles of his master's friends.

When Van Bibber came back he found on his dressing-table a note from Walters stating that he could not, of course, expect to remain longer in his service, and that he left behind him the twenty-eight dollars which the dinner had cost.

"If he had only gone off with all my waistcoats and scarf-pins, I'd have liked it better," said Van Bibber, "than his leaving me cash for infernal dinner. Why, a servant like Walters is worth twenty-eight-dollar dinners —twice a day."

The Hungry Man was Fed

Young Van Bibber broke one of his rules of life one day and came down-town. This unusual journey into the marts of trade and finance was in response to a call from his lawyer, who wanted his signature to some papers. It was five years since Van Bibber had been south of the north side of Washington Square, except as a transient traveller to the ferries on the elevated road. And as he walked through the City Hall Square he looked about him at the new buildings in the air, and the bustle and confusion of the streets, with as much interest as a lately arrived immigrant.

He rather enjoyed the novelty of the situation, and after he had completed his business at the lawyer's office he tried to stroll along lower Broadway as he did on the Avenue.

But people bumped against him, and carts and drays tried to run him down when he crossed the side streets, and those young men whom he knew seemed to be in a great hurry, and expressed such amused surprise at seeing him that he felt very much out of place indeed. And so he decided to get back to his club window and its quiet as soon as possible.

"Hello, Van Bibber," said one of the young men who were speeding by, "what brings you here? Have you lost your way?"

"I think I have," said Van Bibber. "If you'll kindly tell me how I can get back to civilization again, be obliged to you."

"Take the elevated from Park Place," said his friend from over his shoulder, as he nodded and dived into the crowd.

The visitor from up-town had not a very distinct idea as to where Park Place was, but he struck off Broadway and followed the line of the elevated road along Church Street. It was at the corner of Vesey Street that a miserable-looking, dirty, and red-eyed object stood still in his

tracks and begged Van Bibber for a few cents to buy food. "I've come all the way from Chicago," said the Object, "and I haven't tasted food for twenty-four hours."

Van Bibber drew away as though the Object had a contagious disease in his rags, and handed him a quarter without waiting to receive the man's blessing.

"Poor devil!" said Van Bibber. "Fancy going without dinner all day!" He could not fancy this, though he tried, and the impossibility of it impressed him so much that he amiably determined to go back and hunt up the Object and give him more money. Van Bibber's ideas of a dinner were rather exalted. He did not know of places where a quarter was good for a "square meal," including "one roast, three vegetables, and pie." He hardly considered a quarter a sufficiently large tip for the waiter who served the dinner, and decidedly not enough for the dinner itself. He did not see his man at first, and when he did the man did not see him. Van Bibber watched him stop three gentlemen, two of whom gave him some money, and then the Object approached Van Bibber and repeated his sad tale in a monotone. He evidently did not recognize Van Bibber, and the clubman gave him a half-dollar and walked away, feeling that the man must surely have enough by this time with which to get something to eat, if only a luncheon.

This retracing of his footsteps had confused Van Bibber, and he made a complete circuit of the block before he discovered that he had lost his bearings. He was standing just where he had started, and gazing along the line of the elevated road, looking for a station, when the familiar accents of the Object again saluted him.

When Van Bibber faced him the beggar looked uneasy. He was not sure whether or not he had approached this particular gentleman before, but Van Bibber conceived an idea of much subtlety, and deceived the Object by again putting his hand in his pocket.

"Nothing to eat for twenty-four hours! Dear me!" drawled the clubman, sympathetically. "Haven't you any money, either?"

"Not a cent," groaned the Object, "an' I'm just faint for food, sir. S' help me. I hate to beg, sir. It isn't the money I want, it's jest food. I'm starvin', sir."

"Well," said Van Bibber, suddenly, "if it is just something to eat you want, come in here with me and I'll give you your breakfast." But the man held back and began to whine and complain that they wouldn't let the likes of him in such a fine place.

"Oh, yes, they will," said Van Bibber, glancing at the bill of fare in front of the place. "It seems to be extremely cheap. Beefsteak fifteen cents, for instance. Go in," he added, and there was something in his tone which made the Object move ungraciously into the eating-house.

It was a very queer place, Van Bibber thought, and the people stared very hard at him and his gloves and the gardenia in his coat and at the tramp accompanying him.

"You ain't going to eat two breakfasts, are yer?" asked one of the very tough-looking waiters of the Object. The Object looked uneasy, and Van Bibber, who stood beside his chair, smiled in triumph.

"You're mistaken," he said to the waiter. "This gentleman is starving; he has not tasted food for twenty-four hours. Give him whatever he asks for!"

The Object scowled and the waiter grinned behind his tin tray, and had the impudence to wink at Van Bibber, who recovered from this in time to give the man a half-dollar and so to make of him a friend for life. The Object ordered milk, but Van Bibber protested and ordered two beefsteaks and fried potatoes, hot rolls and two omelettes, coffee, and ham with bacon.

"Holy smoke! watcher think I am?" yelled the Object, in desperation.

"Hungry," said Van Bibber, very gently. "Or else an impostor. And, you know, if you should happen to be the latter, I should have to hand you over to the police."

Van Bibber leaned easily against the wall and read the signs about him, and kept one eye on a policeman across the street. The Object was choking and cursing through his breakfast. It did not seem to agree with him. Whenever he stopped Van Bibber would point with his stick to a still unfinished dish, and the Object, after a husky protest, would attack it as though it were poison. The people sitting about were laughing, and the proprietor behind the desk smiling grimly.

"There, darn ye!" said the Object at last. "I've eat all I can eat for a year. You think you're mighty smart, don't ye? But if you choose to pay that high for your fun, I s'pose you can afford it. Only don't let me catch you around these streets after dark, that's all."

And the Object started off, shaking his fist.

"Wait a minute," said Van Bibber. "You haven't paid them for your breakfast."

"Haven't what?" shouted the Object. "Paid 'em! How could I pay him? Youse asked me to come in here and eat. I didn't want no breakfast, did I? Youse'll have to pay for your fun yerself, or they'll throw yer out. Don't try to be too smart."

"I gave you," said Van Bibber, slowly, "seventy-five cents with which to buy a breakfast. This check calls for eighty-five cents, and extremely cheap it is," he added, with a bow to the fat proprietor. "Several other gentlemen, on your representation that you were starving, gave you other sums to be expended on a breakfast. You have the money with you now. So pay what you owe at once, or I'll call that officer across the street and tell him what I know, and have you put where you belong."

"I'll see you blowed first!" gasped the Object.

Van Bibber turned to the waiter.

"Kindly beckon to that officer," said he.

The waiter ran to the door and the Object ran too, but the tough waiter grabbed him by the back of his neck and held him.

"Lemme go!" yelled the Object. "Lemme go an' I'll pay you."

Everybody in the place came up now and formed a circle around the group and watched the Object count out eighty-five cents into the waiter's hand, which left him just one dime to himself.

"You have forgotten the waiter who served you," said Van Bibber, severely pointing with his stick at the dime.

"No, you don't," groaned the Object.

"Oh, yes," said Van Bibber, "do the decent thing now, or I'll—"

The Object dropped the dime in the waiter's hand, and Van Bibber, smiling and easy, made his way through the admiring crowd and out into the street.

"I suspect," said Mr. Van Bibber later in the day, when recounting his adventure to a fellow-clubman, "that, after I left, fellow tried to get tip back from waiter, for I saw him come out of place very suddenly, you see, and without touching pavement till he lit on back of his head in gutter. He was most remarkable waiter."

Love Me, Love My Dog

Young Van Bibber had been staying with some people at Southampton, L. I., where, the fall before, his friend Travers made his reputation as a cross-country rider. He did this, it may be remembered, by shutting his eyes and holding on by the horse's mane and letting the horse go as it pleased. His recklessness and courage are still spoken of with awe; and the place where he cleared the water jump that every one else avoided is pointed out as Travers's Leap to visiting horsemen, who look at it gloomily and shake their heads. Miss Arnett, whose mother was giving the house-party, was an attractive young woman, with an admiring retinue of youths who gave attention without intention, and for none of whom Miss Arnett showed particular preference. Her whole interest, indeed, was centred in a dog, a Scotch collie called Duncan. She allowed this dog every liberty, and made a decided nuisance of him for every one, around her. He always went with her when she walked, or trotted beside her horse when she rode. He stretched himself before the fire in the dining-room, and startled people at table by placing his cold nose against their hands or putting his paws on their gowns. He was generally voted a most annoying adjunct to the Arnett household; but no one, dared hint so to Miss Arnett, as she only loved those who loved the dog or pretended to do it. On the morning of the afternoon on which Van Bibber and his bag arrived, the dog disappeared and could not be recovered. Van Bibber found the household in a state of much excitement in consequence, and his welcome was necessarily brief. The arriving guest was not to be considered at all with the departed dog. The men told Van Bibber, in confidence, that the general relief among the guests was something ecstatic, but this was marred later by the gloom of Miss Arnett and her inability to think of anything else but the finding of the lost collie. Things became so feverish that for the sake of rest and peace the house-party proposed to contribute to a joint purse for the return of the dog, as even, nuisance as it was, it was not so bad as having their visit spoiled by Miss Arnett's abandonment to grief and crossness.

"I think," said the young woman, after luncheon, "that some of you men might be civil enough to offer to look for him. I'm sure he can't have gone far, or, if he has been stolen, the men who took him couldn't have gone very far away either. Now which of you will volunteer? I'm sure you'll do it to please me. Mr. Van Bibber, now: you say you're so clever. We're all the time hearing of your adventures. Why don't you show how full of expedients you are and rise to the occasion?" The suggestion of scorn in this speech nettled Van Bibber.

"I'm sure I never posed as being clever," he said, "and finding a lost dog with all Long Island to pick and choose from isn't a particularly easy thing to pull off successfully, I should think."

"I didn't suppose you'd take a dare like that, Van Bibber," said one of the men. "Why, it's just the sort of thing you do so well."

"Yes," said another, "I'll back you to find him if you try."

"Thanks," said Van Bibber, dryly. "There seems to be a disposition on the part of the young men present to turn me into a dog-catcher. I doubt whether this is altogether unselfish. I do not say that they would rather remain indoors and teach the girls how to play billiards, but I quite appreciate their reasons for not wishing to roam about in the snow and whistle for a dog. However, to oblige the despondent mistress of this valuable member of the household, I will risk pneumonia, and I will, at the same time, in order to make the event interesting to all concerned, back myself to bring that dog back by eight o'clock. Now, then, if any of you unselfish youths have any sporting blood, you will just name the sum."

They named one hundred dollars, and arranged that Van Bibber was to have the dog back by eight o'clock, or just in time for dinner; for Van Bibber said he wouldn't miss his dinner for all the dogs in the two hemispheres, unless the dogs happened to be his own.

Van Bibber put on his great-coat and told the man to bring around the dog-cart; then he filled his pockets with cigars and placed a flask of brandy under the seat, and wrapped the robes around his knees.

"I feel just like a relief expedition to the North Pole. I think I ought to have some lieutenants," he suggested.

"Well," cried one of the men, "suppose we make a pool and each chip in fifty dollars, and the man who brings the dog back in time gets the whole of it?"

"That bet of mine stands, doesn't it?" asked Van Bibber.

The men said it did, and went off to put on their riding things, and four horses were saddled and brought around from the stable. Each of the four explorers was furnished with a long rope to tie to Duncan's collar, and with which he was to be led back if they found him. They were cheered ironically by the maidens they had deserted on compulsion, and were smiled upon severally by Miss Arnett. Then they separated and took different roads. It was snowing gently, and was very cold. Van Bibber drove aimlessly ahead, looking to the right and left and scanning each back yard and side street. Every now and then he hailed some passing farm wagon and asked the driver if he had seen a stray collie dog, but the answer was invariably in the negative. He soon left the village in the rear, and plunged out over the downs. The wind was bitter cold, and swept from the water with a chill that cut through his clothes.

"Oh, this is great," said Van Bibber to the patient horse in front of him; "this IS sport, this is. The next time I come to this part of the world I'll be dragged here with a rope. Nice, hospitable people those Arnetts, aren't they? Ask you to make yourself at home chasing dogs over an ice fjord. Don't know when I've enjoyed myself so much." Every now and then he stood up and looked all over the hills and valleys to see if he could not distinguish a black object running over the white surface of the snow, but he saw nothing like a dog, not even the track of one.

Twice he came across one of the other men, shivering and swearing from his saddle, and with teeth chattering. "Well," said one of them, shuddering, "you haven't found that dog yet, I see."

"No," said Van Bibber. "Oh, no. I've given up looking for the dog. I'm just driving around enjoying myself. The air's so invigorating, and I like to feel the snow settling between my collar and the back of my neck."

At four o'clock Van Bibber was about as nearly frozen as a man could be after he had swallowed half a bottle of brandy. It was so cold that the ice formed on his cigar when he took it from his lips, and his feet and the dashboard seemed to have become stuck together.

"I think I'll give it up," he said, finally, as he turned the horse's head towards Southampton. "I hate to lose three hundred and fifty dollars as much as any man; but I love my fair young life, and I'm not going to turn into an equestrian statue in ice for anybody's collie dog."

He drove the cart to the stable and unharnessed the horse himself, as all the grooms were out scouring the country, and then went upstairs unobserved and locked himself in his room, for he did not care to have the others know that he had given out so early in the chase. There was a big open fire in his room, and he put on his warm things and stretched out before it in a great easy-chair, and smoked and sipped the brandy and chuckled with delight as he thought of the four other men racing around in the snow.

"They may have more nerve than I," he soliloquized, "and I don't say they have not; but they can have all the credit and rewards they want, and I'll be satisfied to stay just where I am."

At seven he saw the four riders coming back dejectedly, and without the dog. As they passed his room he heard one of the men ask if Van Bibber had got back yet, and another say yes, he had, as he had left the cart in the stable, but that one of the servants had said that he had started out again on foot.

"He has, has he?" said the voice. "Well, he's got sporting blood, and he'll need to keep it at fever heat if he expects to live. I'm frozen so that I can't bend my fingers."

Van Bibber smiled, and moved comfortably in the big chair; he had dozed a little, and was feeling very contented. At half-past seven he began to dress, and at five minutes to eight he was ready for dinner and stood looking out of the window at the moonlight on the white lawn below. The snow had stopped falling, and everything lay quiet and still as though it were cut in marble. And then suddenly across the lawn, came a black, bedraggled object on four legs, limping painfully, and lifting its feet as though there were lead on them.

"Great heavens!" cried Van Bibber, "it's the dog!" He was out of the room in a moment and down into the hall. He heard the murmur of voices in the drawing-room, and the sympathetic tones of the women who were pitying the men. Van Bibber pulled on his overshoes and a great-coat that covered him from his ears to his ankles, and dashed out into the snow. The dog had just enough spirit left to try and dodge him, and with a leap to one side went off again across the lawn. It was, as Van Bibber knew, but three minutes to eight o'clock, and have the dog he must and would. The collie sprang first to one side and then to the other, and snarled and snapped; but Van Bibber was keen with the excitement of the chase, so he plunged forward recklessly and tackled the dog around the body, and they both rolled over and over together. Then Van Bibber scrambled to his feet and dashed up the steps and into the drawing-room just as the people were in line for dinner, and while the minute-hand stood at a minute to eight o'clock.

"How is this?" shouted Van Bibber, holding up one hand and clasping the dog under his other arm.

Miss Arnett flew at the collie and embraced it, wet as it was, and ruined her gown, and all the men glanced instinctively at the clock and said:

"You've won, Van."

"But you must be frozen to death," said Miss Arnett, looking up at him with gratitude in her eyes.

"Yes, yes," said Van Bibber, beginning to shiver. "I've had a terrible long walk, and I had to carry him all the way. If you'll excuse me, I'll go change my things."

He reappeared again in a suspiciously short time for one who had to change outright, and the men admired his endurance and paid up the bet.

"Where did you find him, Van?" one of them asked.

"Oh, yes," they all chorused. "Where was he?"

"That," said Mr. Van Bibber, "is a thing known to only two beings, Duncan and myself. Duncan can't tell, and I won't. If I did, you'd say I was trying to make myself out clever, and I never boast about the things I do."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK EPISODES IN VAN BIBBER'S LIFE ***

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