THE HALLUCINATION OF P. HONTUS VANGAFF

By J. Olivier Curwood.

He was a man without a country. In other words, he was a Yankee. His name was Scraggs.

Scraggs had trotted the globe until he was foot-sore. He was an ordinary man with the capabilities of an extraordinary genius that hadn't yet been put to a test. His bohemian disregard of conventionalism had captivated the world, and that was why he found himself pitted for a while against the Times' cable in London. His methods were so sweetly aggressive toward everything British that the local management found it convenient to smuggle him home again, and Scraggs turned up good-humoredly with just a bit of foreign coloring to his pen.

This was just a little after the connubial convection on Spital street. When a rich old man and his gouty sentiments are brought into conflict with a poor young man and his love, there is room for an argument, especially if the rich man's daughter has convictions of her own, and the mamma is neutral. P. Hontus Van Gaff had an active mind and a serious foot, a crabbed combination hard to beat in an old man. He had rejuvenated a certain sense of infallibility that some time since had lost its vigor through his invalid toe, and for the third time in his life the lord dominant of 200 Spital street was proud of himself.

Immediately upon the announcement of Scraggs's arrival in the city, Miss Jessie sent him an impulsive little note with her whole heart fluttering upon the page. She called him darling Dick, and told him all about it.

"The infernal old humbug!" growled Scraggs. "I've got to pick up a cool million in the next six months or throw Jetty over for life!" A vision of a sweet, girlish face rose beside Scraggs's office desk, with Jetty's raven curls tumbling low over her pink cheeks in such soft, lustrous clusters that Scraggs sank back in his chair with a cry of exquisite joy. "I'll do it! I'll do it, if I have to convulse the universe and send old Van Gaff to perdition along with it!"

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Scraggs was original. Being only an ordinary man he was inclined to feel a little glum at first, then he fell back upon a philosophic diet for a few days and began to disport himself less seriously. He enlisted Tibbels, the sympathetic office boy, and annexed his hopes to a more or less extraordinary combination of ideas. These ideas monopolized his time more and more as they developed in proportion, and finally Scraggs feigned ill-health and petitioned for a two hours' assignment beat among the notables.

Thus led to old Van Gaff's club uptown. Incidentally the two would occasionally meet and exchange remarks, and as Scraggs faithfully held aloof from the formidable mansion on Spital street the barrier of hostility was progressively razed and luke-warm advances of friendship begun on the one side and gingerly accepted as a matter of courtesy on the other. Then Tibbels smuggled a redolent little note to Miss Jessie, and Scraggs sprung his denouement.

It came in the form of a telegram. Van Gaff was pre-eminently a conservative man, but tantamount to this was a certain flexibility of temper that frequently suffused for a more confiding nature, and as the message struck him in a most tantalizing mood he revealed himself and its contents in a wretchedly disgraceful fashion.

"The confounded rascal!" he roared. "The beggar's crazy! Want's me, does he? Want's me to—well, I'll be—" And somehow Jessie wondered if he wasn't thinking of Scraggs.

But the mediating influence of the old gentleman's curiosity interposed for Scraggs, and three minutes before the appointed hour Van Gaff wandered listlessly into his favorite corner of the [illegible]. Now when a rich old man and a poor young man with notions [illegible] supposed most to arbitrate a question [illegible] there commonly ensues a critical period of stoical calm just before procedure. Scraggs had anticipated such a moment in the [illegible] old way, and for once Van Gaff swore Scraggs was affable.

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For a while they argued the equity of recent [illegible] in the club, then Scraggs launched out on a narrative of the queen's imbecility, and wound up by modestly calling her an animated walking-stick with a knot between her shoulders kindly tied by her creator to keep her from unraveling, which immensely pleased Van Gaff. That was a propitious moment for Scraggs.

"Van Gaff," he said, "I want to borrow $10,000!" Scraggs coolly replenished the old gentleman's wine glass, and rising from the table walked meditatively across to an opposite window.

"You," he repeated [illegible]. If I am [illegible] I will be [illegible] a [illegible]

at the depot by Prendergast and Stagg. The latter's face was white and strained under the flickering lights, and his voice trembled slightly as he accosted his friend.

"It's a nasty job, Scraggs. Thirty of the fellows are here and they're all as true as steel, of course. But wickedness will out, Scraggs—and there's the devil to pay for tonight's frolic!"

"Hush!" said Prendergast.

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That midnight startling news flashed across the wires from Newport. The German emperor had been mobbed by American citizens! He had been stripped and hung, and his body thrown into the sea! The alarming intelligence electrified the whole world! It was cabled to Europe. Like wildfire it spread through all the great cities of the two continents. From London it stole into Berlin and Paris, from Paris to St. Petersburg and Rome. The federal council assembled, and the stormy reichstag unanimously pledged a billion dollars to vindicate their outraged honor upon the high seas!

In London "Americans" went down like lead. Early in the day a diminutive flurry struck Wall street, then a few isolated markets felt the pressure increasing and jumped into precipitate selling. Hour after hour Van Gaff watched the exchanges. When these closed he hovered with the overflowing crowd about the hotel lobbies and curbs awaiting the latest returns from Paris and London. Reports only thickened the gloom, and the bulls became ominously discreet.

Scraggs was jubilant. He calmly received the World's congratulations at 7:30 p. m. the following day, and five minutes after prepared himself for a desperate sally on 200 Spital street. Naturally he was not a nervous man, but as he drew near his sweetheart's home he yawned frequently, and there was not enough pure oxygen in the car to satisfy his stifling lungs. It was an outrageously sultry night.

The big mansion was as gloomy as a tomb. A single gleam of light peeped between the closed curtains and shot quiveringly athwart the great brown steps. With impatient fingers Scraggs touched the bell and placed one foot carelessly on the threshold. A moment later the door swung open, a smothered cry, "O Dick!" trembled from the dark hallway and a pair of tender arms was thrown impetuously about Scraggs's neck.

"What in thunder—Jetty! Never mind my scripture, dear; this is the sweetest little surprise I've had since his majesty was strung up at Newport! Rather an unceremonious job, eh?" and Scraggs hugged the pretty face to his neck and kissed it a dozen times.

"Hush—papa is in the library, Dick," whispered the girl. "It's as black as a dungeon in there, and mamma is afraid to venture near him! You're sure it won't hurt—him—dear?"

"Unless he commits suicide," confided Scraggs, "it won't phase him! No, no, little one, I didn't mean that," he quickly added, as Jessie caught her breath in a trembling little sob. "I won't give him the chance—I'll buckle into 'im right away! Where is he?"

Scraggs pressed his lips to Jetty's silken curls and gave her a reassuring little hug. "Just tell him it's Scraggs," he said, "and that I'm fresh from Newport, and know a thing or two about affairs over in Capel court and Wall street. Run along, sweetheart."

"You're going with me, Dick. Come."

There was a gentle firmness in the girl's voice that surprised Scraggs. Cleverly extricating herself from his arms she caught him firmly by the hand and led the way through the hall. The library door was slightly ajar, and tapping lightly on the panel Jessie stepped into the room.

"Papa, Mr. Scraggs is here right from Newport, and he knows all about—about—"

"Wall street and London!" whispered Scraggs, frantically.

"He knows all about—"

"He don't know anything," growled the old man, cruelly. "Turn the lights and show him in!"

"Beg pardon, Mr. Van Gaff," objected Scraggs. "You're mistaken!" As the lights flashed in his eyes he turned a quick glance of warning to his sweetheart. "I've got Wall and Lombard streets under my heel!" he ventured.

Van Gaff straightened up as though thrilled by a sudden electric shock.

"Scraggs, I've always considered you the biggest fool in christendom, and until you have exonerated yourself by a single plausible act I shall continue to look upon you as a fit subject for a lunatic asylum! My boy, your brains are mud!"

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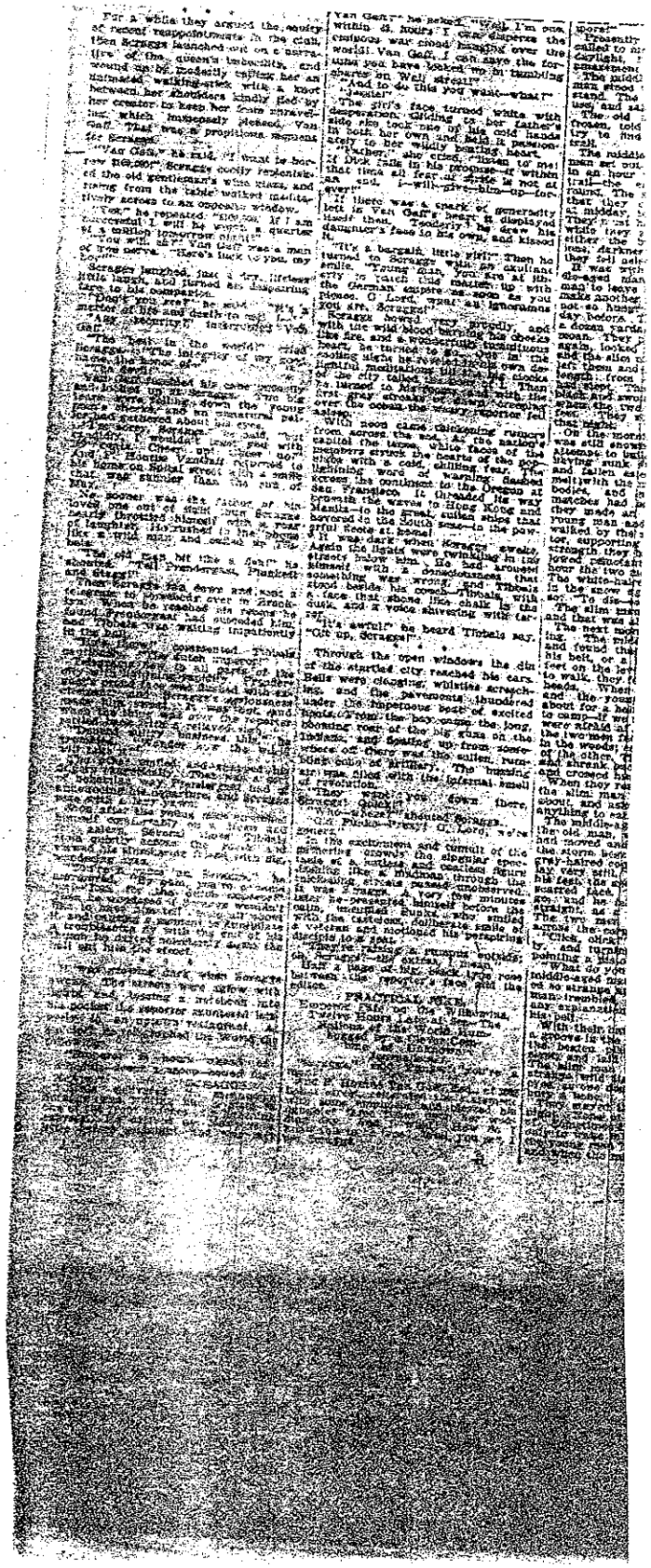
Jessie winced and colored furiously, but Scraggs only laughed and threw a reproachful look at the choleric old man on the opposite side of the table.

"Do you know what a genius is, Van Gaff?" he asked. "Well, I'm one. Within 48 hours I can disperse the cyclopean war cloud hanging over the world! Van Gaff, I can save the fortune you have locked up in tumbling shares on Wall street!"

"And to do this you want—what?"

"Jessie!"

The girl's face turned white with desperation. Gliding to her father's side she took one of his cold hands in both her own and held it passionately to her wildly beating heart.

"Father," she cried, "listen to me! If Dick fails in his promise—if within that time all fear of strife is not at an end, I—will—give—him—up—forever!"

If there was a spark of generosity left in Van Gaff's heart it displayed itself then. Tenderly he drew his daughter's face to his own, and kissed it.