

WHEN A MAN MUST BE

INEZ G. THOMPSON

MARTY BREEN tried to scowl as he caught glimpses of his own trig sturdiness reflected in the mirrors of shop windows he passed. He knew that he ought to be feeling serious and a little ashamed; but his thin, flexible lips would quirk back to a curve of happy content. The man Ellen Joyce had said "yes" to couldn't despise himself—even though the condition she had added to the word left him humbled and bewildered. She had told him that she didn't like his job. Would he—did he care enough for her to find different work? . . . Care! There was nothing he wouldn't do, nothing he couldn't do! He fairly stepped off and up on air as he swung out from the sidewalk at a crossing. . . . Why, he had thought of forty things to do, in as many hours; and all he needed to advise his choice was a talk with Eddie Nelligan, with whom he had talked over all the big and little things that had come to him since small-boyhood.

Car after car pounded past as he walked back and forth on the curb. The last had been one later than Eddie's usual car, and dusk was gathering, as he stood to watch the next oncoming car. But no Eddie Nelligan dropped off.

"Hi! Where's Nelligan—ain't Eddie Nelligan off yet?" he shouted. The conductor leaned far out to answer, but the wind cut out all save "home" and "pretty sick."

Martin stood where he was for an instant gaping after the lessening lights; then turned, stared at the narrow brick canon of street ahead, and—rousing all at once—started at a swinging pace for the Nelligans'. What had Rose been about not to let him know! And what had he been about, to let any woman—even Ellen—fuddle him into forgetting his chum for so many weeks! Two at a time he took the stairs of the tenement's first flight and second—but turning to the third was stopped, foot and breath. From the floor above, muffled but unmistakable, came the shrill wailing and after babbling moan of an anguished woman. It was Rose Nelligan's voice. . . . After a long minute he took the third flight, holding to the rail, going heavily; and halfway looked up—to see Eddie Nelligan's self in his conductor's cap and uniform standing before his own closed door gripping the knob with his left hand, facing the stairs and not moving.

"Hah! Martin Breen's pent breath left him gasping. "There y'are! I heard—I thought y'was—sick."

Eddie Nelligan looked at him without seeing till the moaning beyond the door quieted. "It's the kid," he said then, slowly. "He's got the dipther'a. They took him in the ambulance, two hours ago." His hand swung the knob. "An' I wa'n't here!"

The door of the other tenement that gave on the box of a hall was opened gently, and neighbor Otto Gutmann—his own bass viol made flesh—came out to him. He was in his shirt sleeves, held a fork in one fat, pink hand and wiped the other, professionally, on the striped apron that draped him from armpits to knees. His gross, good face was very red, and light, warmth and savory smells flooded after him into the dim, cold place. He brushed his voice to a mellow ramble.

"Hello, Marty—you make dis feller coom in to me. My voman iss mit Rosie—he can't go in. I got some goot hot supper, alretty—it iss bedder to eat somed'ing."

"It sure is!" Relief cracked Martin's voice as he reached, half-jestingly, to the hand that held the knob; but at the touch Eddie Nelligan fell back, his right arm coming up.

"Cut it out—get along!" he rasped. "I ain't a— A new sound checked him: the neglected girl baby that had come to the Nelligans but six weeks back began to cry lustily. Martin slid his hand up to the shoulder of his friend.

"Yes y'are, Eddie. Yer goin' 't eat an' drink an'—back up!—'cause y'got tuh. See?" And constrained by his hold, his eyes, and that helpless, reminding cry, Eddie Nelligan let himself be led.

"S-so," murmured the sympathetic Otto. "Cut you coom, also, Marty—I can cook bedder as I can blay, I bet you!"

It was, therefore, with genuine distress added to his unrelieved predicament that Martin—three hours later and an hour later—the Joyce bell. There was no white-papery, gilt-corded box of sweets in his hand—he had forgotten the custom in his hurry; and a reminiscence of the stout fragrance of Otto's frying and beer and tobacco clinging to his garments despite the vigorous cleansing of the wind. Miss Ellen emerged from his embrace suspiciously alert and over-poweringly the lady.

"I'd most decided you wasn't coming"—her tone was chill. "But I shouldn't have set up to wonder why—I've had so many callers to-day I'm most tired to death. It's just so ev'ry Sunday." But the obvious deduction that there were those to make his deficiency marked was beyond Martin's troubled mind—nor did his adoring and supplicating gaze atone for the blunder of his literal reply.

"Well, I ain't goin' t'keep yuh up long—I gotta get back an' set up with Eddie. His kid's sick an' his wife's in a bad way."

"Oh! There's lot's of sickness this weather," remarked Miss Joyce in her best manner. "Don't let me keep you any time you want to go, Mr. Breen."

"Huh?" He sat straight. "Who yuh

callin' 'mister'!" Miss Joyce laughed and adjusted her barett.

"Why, I thought it was understood you was to be 'mister' till a certain change was made," she reminded him. He stared an instant, a shade of red deeper than his normal ruddy hue creeping over his cheeks, then reached for her hand.

"Say, Elly, listen—this is how it was: I had three'r four things I was goin' t'ask Eddie—about jobs—"

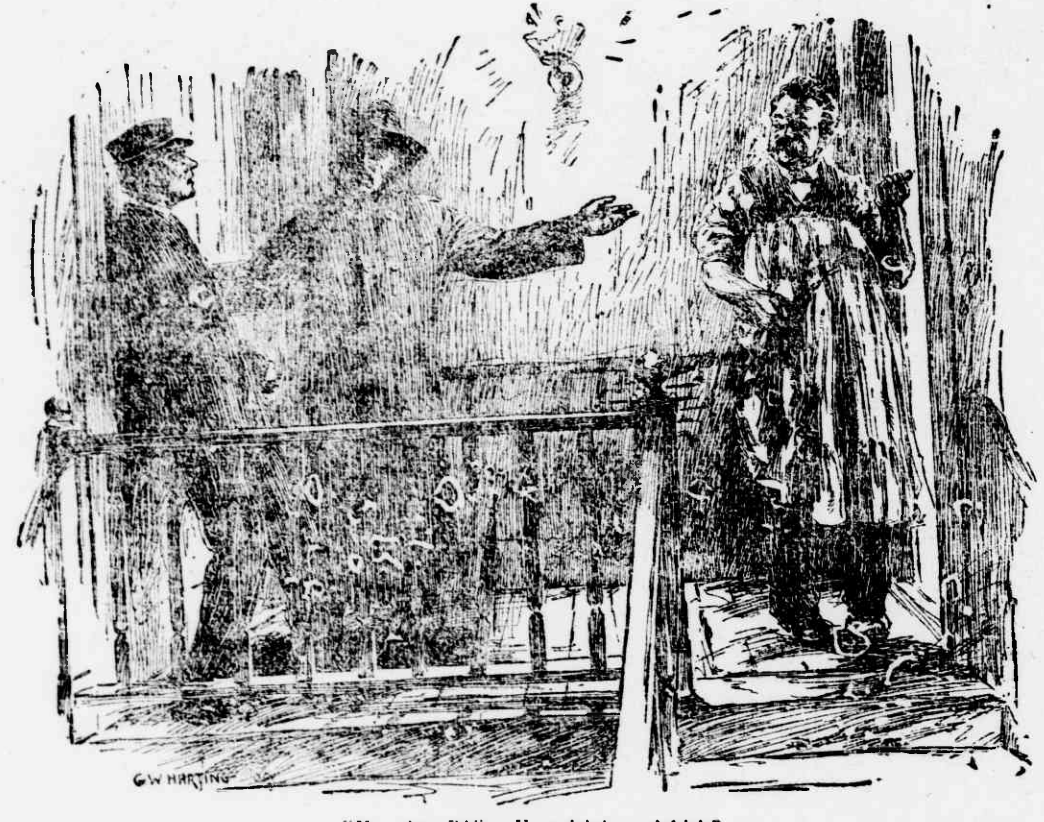
"What's Mr. Nelligan got to do with it, I'd like to know?" she interrupted. He hadn't heard that tone from her before—he held her fingers less ardently.

Copyright 1909

—afterward. She swallowed the words that were uppermost.

"Well—if you think enough of me to do it—why—"

"That's far enough, kid—leave it." He seized her hands again, looking at her hungrily, visibly adoring her—blond hair, provocative eyes, little nose, stubborn chin, shapely prettiness, pink-and-whiteness, and strove, vainly, to voice his heart. "Yer—the whole thing. . . . Say, what'd yuh rather I made a stab at—what kind of a job the likes o' me can do, I mean?"



"Yes, y'are, Eddie. Yer goin' 't eat an' drink"

"Why, Eddie—Eddie's m'friend!" he answered with the accent of one who explains everything. Miss Joyce released her hand in order to pull up her very-high collar points behind the ears.

"Oh! Your friend is he? Oh yes! An' I'm only the girl you're engaged to—or pretend you want to be! You couldn't do anything to please me without askin' him about it, o'course—an' if he says you're a fool to—"

"Say, yer headin' wrong—dead wrong!" An inflection in his voice responded to the irritation in hers. "He ain't that kind, Eddie ain't! He—say, what's the matter, anyhow?" Her answer snapped.

"Why can't you talk things over with me—it means more to me than it does to him! He's never cared, all this while, whether you worked in a saloon or—"

He gave an unfortunate snort of derision. "Care—what did he ought to care for? Eddie don't care what I do—it's me he's pals with."

"Is it—are you sure?" Her voice trembled with anger. "You make good money where you are, an' it's your own uncle's place—a good many would be friends to you, if all they cared was to borrow money or get—"

His chair toppled as he came to his feet. "Say—see here! That don't go—it don't go any! D'yuh take meh fr an easy mark? D'yuh s'pose I don't know a white man when I've chummed with him fr twenty years—what? He don't—aw, Elly, say! I don't like yuh t'talk that way—don't let's have any more of it."

Miss Joyce stood, also, taking tight hold on the back of her chair.

"Well—I'm perfectly agreeable—we won't. We won't have any more of any kind. . . . You'll have a better time with your friend than you ever could with me, for I'm only—"

His hand on her shoulder stopped her. From angry scarlet he had gone fairly to pallor, and his blue eyes were darkly bright as they met hers, close.

"You—r the whole thing," he said. "Yuh know it, too. What'd we want t'scrap fr—what started it? It ain't Eddie—r anybody—I want t'talk about—it's us. . . . Do we—go on? Or did yuh mean that about callin' it off?"

"I— Miss Joyce took a quick breath. His hand tightened.

"Go easy—I want t'do what yuh want; but jobs ain't hollerin' fr someone t'come an' take 'em, mind! If you—"

"I told you," she said rapidly, "that I wouldn't marry you if you stayed where you are, and I won't. How d'yuh s'pose I'd feel havin' ev'ryone say I'd married a—a saloon bouncer!" Up flooded the red in spite of his.

"What do I care what ev'ryone says—it's you I'm askin'! An' I won't be a bouncer fr ever—the ol' man he wanted meh t'learn the business, like, so sometime he could take meh in—"

"What! After all I've said—an' you've said—do you mean t'talk of being in partnership in a saloon—selling liquor—"

He let his hand fall and spoke sullenly.

"Well—they's money in it, an' I guess you c'n use all—say, see here. It looks like you an' me's goin' t'scrap fr fair if one of us don't sidestep. . . . I'll be it. If I give the whole thing the go-by—if I get a job that sounds good t'yuh—do I win? Yes'r no."

She opened her mouth—and shut it. He meant it. And even through her indignation she was aware that "no" would mean to her

"Why—you c'n do a lot of things, can't you?" Point won, her blond head snuggled to his shoulder. "Anything you want to—only tell me about it first. . . . I didn't know what kept you to-night—an' a girl's apt to think—"

So Martin Breen went back to the Gutmanns' a happier man than he deserved to be, he felt, with the matter still in the air. And when that day week found it still in no fair way to being arranged he—lied to her. It wasn't that he hadn't tried, and faithfully, in such time as he managed to get from his work; but those he sounded for advice and assistance took his inquiries as a joke. "Miah Mullin's 'place' would be coming to him some day—what in the name of Prosperity could a young chap ask more? And as Martin himself fully appreciated the sense of that attitude, he found nothing to say—grinned, and let it go as they took it. Such opportunities as he found in a private capacity staggered him with the meagreness of return they offered. He couldn't tell Ellen Joyce that that was the best money his inches and breadth and muscle and boast could bring her. So he fell back on the consolation that Eddie Nelligan's superior intelligence would straighten things as soon as he was free to hear how they were—and that would be before long, for the young Eddie was getting well in spite of the scare. Meantime, then, Ellen heard highly encouraging accounts of interviews that never took place and experiments that never were tried. He found himself developing an imagination. She was proud of him. Not proud of his strength or his nerve—but his cleverness! It intoxicated him.

It was an encounter (in his rôle at Mullin's) with a certain successful Real Estate man that gave him, at a critical time, his inspiration. He got much business color from the gentleman (who under the iron hands veered from the pugnacious to the confidential stage of his condition), and Ellen Joyce was transported by the modest announcement of a secured position that exceeded her utmost ambition. That night he got his "yes." Ellen left the department store where, for five years, she had sold ladies' garments, and began the getting together of garments of her own—a proceeding that somehow transformed her to such a lovable, new, yielding, shyly speculative Ellen, that Martin Breen felt himself alternately a conqueror of all earth and a felon. Now and then he had wild notions of keeping up the lie; but knew that for a dozen reasons he wouldn't be able.

Just one day after Eddie's boy came home from the hospital, he went to make confession. But Rose, hysterical with happiness, was living the black time through again to a pair of ejaculating women in the kitchen where Eddie was taking his supper—the babies were much in evidence; and there was no opportunity for such confidences as he had come to make. Moreover, Eddie didn't seem himself. He hunched over his meal on the table-corner, scowling and dabbing at his plate, speaking gruffly when he was spoken to, and actually snapped at the boy for making a noise. That brought Rose at him, volubly. A noise, indeed!—when but for a merciful God they'd be praying, that minute, only to hear a sound of him—

Eddie caught up his cap and left, slamming the door on her tears. Martin went after him. It did not seem an auspicious moment, but his own trouble demanded utterance. On the corner he blurted it out.

"Say, listen, Eddie. I wanta talk t'yuh. . . . Y'see, I got a girl—"

"A-yuh, I betcher have!" came the scornful comment. "Yer jes' the sort of a cussed fool 'at would have! When yes sorry fr it, lemme know," and therewith he stepped out to a passing car, swung aboard and was gone.

"Well—wha' d'yuh know about that!" Martin asked himself, bewildered; and presently grew aggrieved. Eddie had failed him—friendship had failed him. It was desperation, sheer, that drove him to the next step: he went to the Real Estate personage whose name had worked such magic—applied for the coveted position; and was made wiser by full knowledge of the difference between that successful gentleman drunk, and ditto, sober.

Daily that week, moreover, he suffered the humiliation of the incompetent job-hunter; but there was nothing for it but to try Eddie Nelligan again.

He chose a Sunday. Eddie had more leisure on that day, and the strain of worry over the boy would be well past. Moreover, the year was ending—this was its last Sunday; and Ellen was beginning to wonder that no day had been set. The prospect was showing nearer and uglier that he would have to tell her—tell Ellen—the truth. . . . He needed Eddie desperately; and it was the last straw that Eddie shouldn't be at home. Nobody was at home.

In a gust of temper he gave the door a mighty kick and rattle and had turned to the stairs, when someone scuffed heavily across the floor of the Gutmann kitchen and opened the door. It was Minna, Otto's wife, and his double.

"Coom herein," she called. "I haf some very goot coffee—" then stopped. Martin twitched his hat off and on, briefly.

"How d'do, Mis' Gutmann?" 'Tis Breen. D'yuh know where Eddie is?" Minna Gutmann did not answer at once; but then she and hurry were ever hostile.

"Eddie Nelligan," she repeated finally, "he—I t'ought you was Rosie coom back. She has been a longer time gone. . . . She has gone to Ettie. He iss py der hospidle gone—"

"What?"

"Yah—dis morning only. Id iss dos pneumonyah he catches—"

Martin fell back to the Nelligan door and leaned against it, his hand dropping to the knob where Eddie's hand had held that Sunday of the boy's taking.

"Which—hospit'?" he asked. Minna shook her head.

"I don't know. Rosie cot tell—she iss gone dere. Mebbe yuh coom see her soon?" It was tentative. Martin nodded.

"Ayuh—you tell her so. I'll go try look him up. Much oblige, Mis—" As he pushed himself away from the door, the final movement jarred something loose within—something that fell to the wooden floor with an unmistakable click. It was the key—inside. . . . For an instant they stared; then Martin whipped about, rattled the knob, beat on the panels and called, "Rose—Rosie! Rose—Nelligan!" There was no answer. He looked back, uncertainly, at Minna Gutmann. She had covered her mouth with her apron and her eyes were frightened. He bent to the keyhole and smiled—in the next movement was up, hat and coat off, and she had caught them from him; and he thudded, shoulder first, against the panels. Once, twice—flung himself furiously the third time, and smashed in. The taint of the gas was stronger.

First, that closed inner room, he brought Eddie's babies to Minna; then, after a gulp of air, was in again and out, dragging Rose, who strove against him with what consciousness was left her. There was another run in to turn off the gas—open windows; and then work.

Little Eddie Nelligan came alive first—deadly sick; but it took a fearful while to make sure of the flicker of breath in the girl-baby's body. It was done at last, though—the need of a doctor and dread of arrest past; and then, zeal of saving life over, the meaning of it—what it must mean—came to Martin Breen. Rosie lay on the lounge where he had put her, an arm over her eyes, her lips blue, and such of her pale little face as he could see drawn with nausea. He went out, abruptly, muttering that he must fix the broken door. What he wanted was to be by himself. . . . He shut the windows, through which the snow was driving, lighted the gas in the Nelligan kitchen, and sat down by the table to think. . . . So that had been the matter with Eddie—with his pal, Eddie. . . . He took his tongue between his teeth and bit till the hurt of it angered him. Think he must—but for the living! Himself had brought Eddie's wife and babies back to what life would be for them; and, in all the world, he knew there was none save himself to help them face it. It was there that he broke out and cursed, alone as he was—cursed, blackly and briefly, the craven within him that asked why he should take the burden of it—sneering that only a fool would saddle himself with another man's dropped cares when his own were so pressing and so dear. And but for that once, the craven was not heard even to whisper. . . . What he conceived to be duty Martin Breen faced to the full, and accepted, in the half hour he took for his own. Then he shook himself to action. On the table lay a fat envelope, sealed and addressed to Minna Gutmann; but because he guessed its contents he opened it.

"Deer Minna (Rose had scrawled) Eddie is goin' to die they sed they coodent give me any hope an' i cant stand it thats all. Ij i had bin better to Eddie an not that so much of my children he woodent of got sick. Take this \$5 an pay my milk bill-will you. i dont want to cheat anybody. you keep the rest an all my things. Martin Breen will see to berryin us with what they is in the bank, the bank book is under the clock. Minna i cant rite any more, God bless you an forgive me, Rose Nelligan."

He went back to the first line. "Any hope?" All at once it meant something—meant that Eddie had been alive when it was written. . . . Alive! They couldn't give hope, indeed!—how long since doctors had known it all! A changed man, he went through the Gutmann door and across to Rose, fluttering the paper before her.

"How long ago," he demanded, "how long ago was he livin'?" She moved her head from him and moaned. He pulled away her shielding arm.

"Dead or no—where is he—tell me that!" To be quit of him she answered; but when he rushed in, two hours later, ruddy and incoherent, with word that Eddie was alive—fighting—still, she gave no sign that she heard. Minna Gutmann was shocked at that. Otto, home and busy with the boy, was shocked.

"Vot iss, Rosie?" he reproached her. "Don'd you hear vat Marty says, alretty?" Then it was that Rose uncovered her dull eyes.

"What's the use o' keepin' at me?" she mumbled. "Don't I know he'll die? Fr punishment on me—he'll die. An' only fr you, Martin Breen, I wouldn't a-been behind him. You'll be a smart man t'stop me nex' time—that's all."

It took him an hour of gray morning to write the note to Ellen he finally decided on. After Minna Gutmann came, with hot coffee for him, to take charge; after getting word—still of hope—from the hospital; after hiring Minna's young-giantess cousin, "just over," who would see to Rose, there was no further excuse for delaying. He called a messenger and sent the note. He realized, afterward, that he had expected a word, good or bad, back again. But the messenger brought only the ring.

He sat awhile in the back room at Mullin's, looking at the pretty thing and letting it hurt all it would.

Twice, that age-long day, he got word to Rose that Eddie lived; and when he looked in on her, late that night, it was to find her feverish with hope, yet unable to believe.



"Happy New Year t'yuh, Larry"

"You wouldn't lie t'me, Marty," he besought him—"you wouldn't do it, not fr the fear o' God. . . . He—he is livin', Marty?"

"I ain't lyin'—he is. In another day they can tell—" She threw up her arms, wailing.

Mullin's was packed comfortably full; and Larry Hennigan—pallidly composed, lightning-handed, clipping out greetings and retorts—was in his element. He got Martin's eyes as he entered and beckoned with a jerk of his black head.

"Ye're t'come behind t'night, an' steady fr now on. The ol' man's been in," he announced. It would have surprised most men that the promotion was received in silence; but Larry Hennigan never tried, apparently, to account for anything, and never showed surprise. So one John Winn came in as "bouncer" and Martin set himself, stolidly, to the task of justifying his uncle's favor. A tall, lean and solemn individual brought up before him and saluted, swaying slightly. "Hail, king o' the Joy Juice," he gloomed. "Hail'n' farewell. This is lar's time y'll ev' see me here—know it? Turmin' ov' new leaf—sayin' g'bye to'm. . . . Gimme all y' got—sayin' g'bye to'm. . . . Why don't you turn ov' new leaf?"

The solemn man stared admiringly, leaned forward to confide all—and beheld an hector vanish. A telephone call for Martin Breen—and the one place at which he had left name and number was the hospital—in—

Everything finished, indeed! He felt a superstitious qualm at his own past flippancy as he shut himself into the booth and tilted the receiver.

"Hello—go ahead—"

"Is—oh, Marty! Is it you?" called Ellen Joyce.

He was not in a telephone booth—he was alone on a mountain top at the peak of the world, deafened by silence; and after an age, out of heaven the voice came again, saying, "Martin." And at that something cracked in his head and he was back to things as they were—hearing, feeling, hoping more than ever before in his life.

"Yes—'tis me," he said. The transmitter gave a queer, muffled sound.

"I'm—Ellen. I want—Marty, do you know it's New Year's Eve?"

"Hah! Yes—I know it!" For the life of him he could say no more—nor different. Silence a space; then the wire sang to his soul.

"Martin—I can't help it, I can't stand it. Won't you come again? You don't need t'tell me anything at all, I'll never ask—anything, but even if you hate an' despise me I got t'see you again. I'll ask your pardon—but this night is killin' me, Marty. . . . Won't you come back?"

To his utter bewilderment he found himself angry.

"Ayuh, well—they's one or two things. . . . I ain't jumpin' through the hoop any more. I'm on the bar now—get that?"

"Yes—yes, I know—but Marty—"

"Wait a bit. I'm on the bar, an' goin' t'stay there. I got t'stan' by the Nelligans a while, an' I ain't puttin' up any more bluff. I can't be nothin' but what I am, an' it's got ter be me—with no trimmin's on—if I—"

"Oh I know it, I know it, Marty. . . . I was a fool. I don't care what folks say—it's only I was afraid. . . . My father died drunk, Marty, an' I've seen my mother cry all night ever since I was a little kid, an' he useter lick me—I'm a-scarit of the liquor, Marty, an' a-scarit to have you there, an' sellin' it. . . . But I'll take my chance—I got to, Marty, an' I'm willin'—"

"Why didn't you tell me that afore?"

"I was ashamed. . . . I wanted to be a lady, Marty, I guess—oh, I'm a fool! But

it don't matter any more—what you do—you'll only . . . Marty!"

"Well?"

"Marty, do—don't you—care any more?" Ellen! Ellen, asking him that! His girl's sweet, his lady—he croaked out a laugh that was twin to a sob.

"Care—any more—why, good God! When did I stop carin'?" . . . He heard her crying. . . . After a moment he managed words again.

"Ellen—where you 'phonin' from, this time o' night?"

"The drug store booth, on the corner. Mother's waitin' outside."

"Well—go home. Go home an' wait up. I'll come afore midnight if I can make it. . . . Say, Ellen—if yuh a-told me straight. . . . I ain't stuck in it here—if we'd live cheaper—mebbe I'd make a stab at somethin' else. . . . I'm willin'—I'll try it—honest. . . . I'll talk to over when I come. . . . I'll try t'get these so we c'n watch the New—Ellen!"

"Yes?"

"Watch out at the winder till I come, darlin'."

Somehow he got back to the bar drunker than any man other side of it. Larry Hennigan looked at him, in a huff, narrowed his handsome eyes in an instant's scrutiny—and grinned. Martin lunged nearer.

"H-Hennigan," he said. "Say, Hennigan, I gotta—I want ter—couldn't I—"

Larry sneered genially. "Sure—all right—stop garglin' an' beat it, if that's what you mean."

But at the very door, tugging on his overcoat, Martin checked himself. Because he must, in his happiness, he went back, slipped a place in the ranks and put out his hand.

"Happy New Year t'yuh, Larry," he beamed. Larry balanced a silver strainer deftly, on a shaker, and met the grip with one brief but as hearty, letting a flicker of his canny understanding shine.

"Thanks. Same t'youn an' many o'—to you an' the lady!" said he.