

HOW MANY CARDS?

By ISABEL OSTRANDER

Author of "The Island of Intrigue," "Suspense," "Ashes to Ashes," etc. Copyright, 1921, by Robert M. McBride & Co.

"Oh, I'll give it, fast enough!" Ford's harsh, dry laughter rang out and then was as quickly suppressed. "I don't know whether it will help you or not, for I haven't the slightest idea who killed Creveling, but I'll give you all the information you want about the whole rotten business of them! I kept my mouth shut yesterday because I had a sort of foreboding hope that they'd be white enough to tide me over even after Creveling himself had weeded, but when Mr. Cutter threw me a cold I made up my mind that I'd show them all up and I will!"

"They got the money—my own, not your customers'—but if I had a cent more I could have weathered the storm. I wouldn't kick if the game had been straight; I'm not a poor loser, but I'm convinced it was crooked and I've been sharp with you to get a cigarette money after he's stripped you of your roll."

"Game?" McCarty repeated, a light beginning to glimmer through his consciousness.

"Of course. I was on my way to being a rich man even in these sky-rocketing days, but it's all gone over that green table of Cutters', damn him!" Ford stopped abruptly and the look of rage in his face faded to a look of sly derision. "You fellows at headquarters are mighty smart, but you didn't know that the biggest game in the city was played in the back of a house in his down on the avenue. He is nothing more nor less than a professional gambler, only he was known before even in the Big Town."

"A gambler! The connecting link at last!"

Then the memory of a chance remark of Dennis on the previous evening returned to make his chin quiver. When he told his friend about the Kip woman and how she had broken one day and flush the next, Dennis remarked: "Like a gambler, eh? Even then he had not tumbled to the truth! It all seemed so obvious now in the light of this revelation! Those two disguised rounders, Creveling and Waverly, seeking to stimulate their jaded senses with the excitement of the game; this money-mad Ford, to whom all of life had been a gamble; John Cavannagh, sport-loving blood of his forebears in his veins, and Cutter sitting cold and inscrutable in the midst of them! But what of the woman? Where did she figure in this scheme of things? 'I'm not yellow!' Ford went on. 'I wouldn't cry crooked just because I'd been stung, but looking back from now I can see how I was played, like a trout in a stream, and they're doing the same thing to O'Rourke. They'll clean him and his wife, Waverly, and Creveling was helping it along when he got his! He stood in, and I was just beginning to see it; that's why I went to him first and saw what was coming. I wasn't a beggar, I only wanted a loan of some of my own back and Creveling had got most of it. He understood he knew I was on to the same and he told me he'd see me through; made an appointment with me for Thursday and then at the last minute took back his word, which is the same as bluffing me, but I'd have gone back yesterday and gotten it from him somehow, only somebody else got to him first, with \$44,000."

"They'll clean him and his wife, too?" were the last words which had pounded themselves into his brain.

"Do you mean that Lady Mar—that Mrs. O'Rourke plays, too? That Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Creveling and Mrs. Waverly have been going up against a game like that?"

Ford laughed again, mirthlessly.

"They're worse than we are! Not that my wife is an inveterate gambler; as a matter of fact, she's never had any card sense at all and doesn't even care for it. She only piked along because I compelled her to."

"You nodded."

"Oh, I admit I've been a fool in more ways than one, but I'm coming clean to you now for I want you to understand the situation and fix Cutter and his outfit!" he declared frankly.

"I was making money and we were happy enough a few years ago with our own little crowd, but when I bought my seat on the exchange Mrs. Ford got ambitious socially. She met Mrs. Creveling at some charity affair and got in with her, and Creveling introduced me to Cutter. That was the beginning of it and I don't mind telling you that I encouraged Mrs. Ford to travel with that bunch. I thought I'd get in myself through them with my big money interests and I didn't realize I was practically using my own wife as a support, the way Cutter is using Mrs. Billie Kip. She's just a kind of grown-up little girl, my wife, is; she loves to spend money and she's taken up by the swell people and she never can realize that there might be another motive behind the flattery of other men, netters like Cutter. He made a sort of play for her a year or so ago and she came home like a big kid and told me; I let him know where he got off and after that she wasn't bothered, but they had it in for me. You see the game now, don't you, McCarty?"

McCarty nodded slowly in his turn and his expression was very grim, but he waited without speaking.

"Mrs. Creveling and Mrs. Waverly are different; they belong by right of birth and their old, withered family get acquainted in another way they are just as jaded as the husbands. They've exhausted every allowable means of amusing themselves and they turned to the game for what excitement they could get out of it, and it got them—the fascination, I mean, I've seen them, of course?"

"Yes, sir."

"They're both beauties; Mrs. Creveling in a cold, aloof sort of way and Mrs. Waverly is a devilish, sinky beauty. Both mighty attractive and each a different type, get me?"

"You mean that Cutter is using them both as steers, too?" McCarty's honest face was filled with shocked astonishment. "Ladies like them, with position in the highest society, and more money than they can spend?"

"Oh, without their knowledge, of course, but their husbands stood in with Cutter. I know, because they were constantly at his house, at the so-called exclusive dinners and afternoon musicales he was supposed to give, but which really masked the games which went on day and night. The rest of us were rank outsiders asked only on certain specified nights; only the Crevelings and the Waverlys and the different exclusive little groups that gathered there. That is the secret of Cutter's success and his immunity. You don't think he made his millions out of our set, do you? He kept his hands separate, with those exceptions, and only catered to people who could play a said that he could. More than one poor devil has lost his last dollar and still himself in that room back of Cutter's house, and I'll wager there is any given length of time than at Monte Carlo for the same period!"

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