

Produced by Charles Franks and the Online Distributed Proofreading team

THE SECOND-STORY MAN

By Upton Sinclair

CHARACTERS

JIM FARADAY: the second-story man. HARVEY AUSTIN: a lawyer.

HELEN

AUSTIN: his wife.

SCENE: Library of the Austin home.

Time: 2 A.M.

[The scene shows a luxuriously furnished room. In the centre is a table with a lamp. To the right is the entrance into the front hall, the front door of the house being visible. In the corner is a cabinet of curios. In the rear is a large window opening on the street. Open fire-place. There are two entrances at the left. There are book-shelves, several easy-chairs, etc., in the room.]

[At rise: The stage is empty, and the room is darkened except for the fire in the grate. Sounds of breaking wood are heard at the window.]

JIM. [A roughly-dressed young fellow with a patch over one eye, enters through window, stands gazing about nervously, looks into the hall, etc., then flashes a dark lantern.] This looks pretty good.

[Goes to mantel, takes silver cup and puts it into bag which he carries; then exit left.]

AUSTIN. [Enters at front door without much noise. Hangs up coat and hat, and then stands in entrance. He is a smooth-faced young man in evening dress.] All gone to bed, hey?

[Takes out cigarette case and is about to light one, when a crash is heard off left, as of a vase falling. He starts, then runs to table, opens drawer, takes out revolver, and examines it, and steals off through the other entrance at left, saying, "That noise seemed to come from downstairs."]

JIM. [Enters panic-stricken.] God! What a thing to do! [Gazes into hall and upstairs--long pause.] Don't seem to have waked them.

[Proceeds to examine room, stopping now and then to listen. After placing several articles in bag, he goes to cabinet and tries to open it. This takes some time, and while he is crouching in the shadow, with his back to the entrance right, MRS. AUSTIN appears.]

MRS. AUSTIN. [She is young and beautiful, and wears a night-robe and dressing-gown. She stands looking about anxiously, and then goes to centre of room, when she hears a sound from JIM, and starts wildly.] Oh!

JIM. [Leaps to feet, lifting revolver.] Hold up your hands! [She starts back in terror.] Hold up your hands!

MRS. AUSTIN. [Half complyingly.] I'm not armed.

JIM. Never mind. [Long pause while they stare at each other.] I don't want to hurt you, lady.

MRS. AUSTIN. [Calmly, after first shock.] No, I suppose not. You only want to get away.

JIM. That's right!

MRS. AUSTIN. Very well, you may go.

JIM. And you yell for the police the moment I get out of the door, hey?

MRS. AUSTIN. No, I don't want the police. I don't believe in sending men to jail.

JIM. Humph!

[Another pause.]

MRS. AUSTIN. Why do you do this?

JIM. It's the way I live.

MRS. AUSTIN. Isn't it a rather trying kind of work?

JIM. It ain't all play, ma'am.

MRS. AUSTIN. [Smiling.] I should think it would be hard on the nerves. [After another pause.] Is there no honest way you can earn a living?

JIM. I don't know. Maybe so. I got tired of looking for it.

MRS. AUSTIN. I might help you if you would let me.

JIM. I ain't asking any help.

MRS. AUSTIN. No, but I'm offering it. [After a pause.] Have you been doing this sort of thing very long?

JIM. No.

MRS. AUSTIN. How long?

JIM. [After hesitation.] This is my first job.

MRS. AUSTIN. What! You don't mean that?

JIM. It happens to be true, ma'am.

MRS. AUSTIN. What made you do it?

JIM. It's a long story.

MRS. AUSTIN. Tell it to me.

JIM. It ain't just a good time for story telling.

MRS. AUSTIN. You are afraid of me? I have no quarrel with you. I don't

care anything for the things you have in the bag; and, besides, I suppose you won't take them now. I'm only sorry to see a man going wrong, and I'd like to help if I could. I'll play fair, I give you my word of honor.

JIM. There ain't much honor in this business.

MRS. AUSTIN. No, I suppose not. But you can trust me. Put up that gun and talk to me.

JIM. [Surlily.] It can't do any good.

MRS. AUSTIN. It can't do any harm. Put up that revolver, and tell me what's the matter.

JIM. You'll let me go when I want to? No tricks!

MRS. AUSTIN. I give you my word.

JIM. All right. I'm a fool, I guess, but I'll trust you. [Puts revolver in pocket.] Sit down, ma'am. It must be cold for you. This is a queer kind of layout for a burglar. [Sits opposite her.] You heard that racket I made in the other room?

MRS. AUSTIN. Yes. What was it?

JIM. Some kind of a jar.

MRS. AUSTIN. Oh, my Greek vase. Well, never mind... it was an imitation. What were you doing?

JIM. I was looking for something to eat.

MRS. AUSTIN. Oh!

JIM. It would have been the first thing I've had since the day before yesterday.

MRS. AUSTIN. What's the matter?

JIM. No work. [A pause.] I suppose you'll give me the old gag... there's plenty of work for a man that's willing.

MRS. AUSTIN. No, I happen to have studied, and I know better than that. Else I should have fainted when I saw you... instead of sitting here talking to you.... Do you drink?

JIM. Yes, but I didn't use to. Any man would drink... that went through what I did.

MRS. AUSTIN. Are you married?

JIM. Yes... I was married. My wife is dead.

MRS. AUSTIN. Any children?

JIM. Two. Both dead.

MRS. AUSTIN. Oh!

JIM. It ain't a pretty story, ma'am. It's a poor man's story.

MRS. AUSTIN. Tell it to me.

JIM. All right. It'll spoil your sleep for the rest of the night, I guess, but you can have it. [A pause.] A year ago I was what they call an honest working man. I had a home and a happy family; and I didn't drink any too much, and I did well... even if the work was hard. I was in the steel works here in town.

MRS. AUSTIN. [Startled.] The Empire Steel Company?

JIM. Yes. Why?

MRS. AUSTIN. Nothing... only I happen to know some people there.
Go
on.

JIM. It's no child's work there, ma'am. There's an awful lot of accidents... more than the world has any idea of. I've seen a man sent to hell in the snapping of a finger. And they don't treat them fair... they hush things up. There are things you wouldn't believe if I told them to you.

MRS. AUSTIN. Tell them.

JIM. I've seen a man there get caught in one of the cranes. They stopped the machinery, but they couldn't get him out. They'd have had to take the crane apart, and that would have cost several days, and it was rush time, and the man was only a poor Hunkie, and there was no one to know or care. So they started up the crane, and cut his leg off.

MRS. AUSTIN. Oh, horrible!

JIM. It's the sort of thing you couldn't believe unless you saw it. But I saw it. I didn't care, though. I was a fool. And then my time came.

MRS. AUSTIN. How do you mean?

JIM. A blast furnace blew out, and a piece of slag hit me here, where you see that patch. If it wasn't for the patch you'd see something that would make you sick. It was a pain you couldn't tell about... it was a couple of days before I knew where I was. And the first thing when I came to my senses... in the hospital, it was... there was a lawyer chap with a paper waiting for me.

MRS. AUSTIN. [In agitation.] A lawyer?

JIM. Yes, ma'am. Company representative, you know. And I was to sign the paper... it was a receipt for the hospital expenses... the operation and all that... you see they had to take out what was left of my eye. And of course I couldn't see... I had to sign where he told me to. And when I got well, I found they had trapped me into signing a release.

MRS. AUSTIN. A release?

JIM. I had accepted the hospital expenses as a release for all the company owed me. And I couldn't get any damages... and my eye was gone, and all the weeks without any wages.

MRS. AUSTIN. My God!

JIM. And they turned me out so weak I could hardly walk; and...

MRS. AUSTIN. [Greatly excited.] Who was this man?

JIM. Which?

MRS. AUSTIN. This lawyer?

JIM. I never heard his name. He was a young fellow... handsome... smooth-faced...

MRS. AUSTIN. [Whispering.] Oh!

JIM. Ah, they don't mind it... they're smooth. They do that all the time. It's what they get their pay for.

MRS. AUSTIN. [Covering her face with her hands.] Oh, stop!

JIM. What's the matter?

MRS. AUSTIN. [Looking up with white face.] Nothing. Go on.

JIM. It was two months before I could work at all. And the rent came due, and they turned us out... it was winter-time, and my wife caught a cold, and it turned to pneumonia, and she died. That's all of that.

MRS. AUSTIN. Go on.

JIM. And then, you see, the panic came... and the mills shut down... sudden as that. The lawyer told me the company would see I always had a job, but that was only to get me to sign.

MRS. AUSTIN. [Feverishly.] Did you try him?

JIM. I went to the office and tried; but they wouldn't even let me see him.

MRS. AUSTIN. I see. And then?

JIM. Then I went out to look for work. I had the two babies, you know ... and God only knows how I loved those babies. I said I'd fight and win out for their sakes. But Amy... she was the little one... she never had been very strong. When you're a poor man, you can't get the best food, even if you know what it is. It ain't fit milk they sell for the children in this city; and the baby died... I never knew what was the matter exactly. And there was only one left... and me tramping the streets all day looking for a job. How was I to take care of him, lady? How could I have helped it? [His voice is breaking with emotion.] And oh, ma'am, he was the loveliest little fellow... with hair like gold. And so well and strong.

MRS. AUSTIN. [Whispering.] What happened to him?

JIM. A street car killed him.

MRS. AUSTIN. Oh!

JIM. Run over his chest, ma'am. I came home at night, and they told me, and I near went out of my mind. Can you think what it was to see him... with his eyes starting out of his head like, and his beautiful little body all mashed flat...

MRS. AUSTIN. [Wildly.] Oh, spare me!

JIM. I told you it wouldn't be a pretty story. Do you think maybe you wouldn't take to drink if you saw a sight like that? [Sinking back.] Since then I've looked for work, but I haven't cared much. Only sometimes I've thought I'd like to meet that young lawyer...

MRS. AUSTIN. [Starting up.] Oh!

JIM. Yes, it all began with him. But I don't know... they'd only jug me. Anyway, tonight I was sitting in a saloon with two fellows that I had met. One of them was a second-story man... a fellow that climbs up porches and fire-escapes. And I heard him telling about a haul he'd made, and I said to myself: "There's a job for me... I'll be a second-story man." And I tried it... but you see I didn't do very well. I'm not good for much, I guess, any more.

AUSTIN. [Enters left, revolver in hand; stands watching, unobserved.] Good heavens!

MRS. AUSTIN. You can't tell. You may have better success than you look for.

JIM. No... there's nothing can help me. I'm for the scrap heap.

MRS. AUSTIN. [Eagerly.] Wait and see. You are a man... you can be helped yet...

AUSTIN. [Coming forward.] What does this mean?

JIM. [Starts wildly and reaches for revolver.] Ha!

AUSTIN. [Raising weapon.] Holdup your hands!

MRS. AUSTIN. [Rushing forward.] No. Stop!

AUSTIN. What do you mean?

MRS. AUSTIN. I say stop! I promised him his freedom!

AUSTIN. My dear...

MRS. AUSTIN. Give me the weapon.

AUSTIN. Why...

MRS. AUSTIN. Give it to me. [Takes revolver.] Now sit down.

JIM. [Has been staring wildly at AUSTIN.] My God, it's the lawyer fellow!

MRS. AUSTIN. Yes, it is he.

AUSTIN. What does all this mean?

MRS. AUSTIN. Look at this man!

AUSTIN. [Staring.] Why?

MRS. AUSTIN. Don't you know him?

AUSTIN. No.

MRS. AUSTIN. Look carefully. [Turns up light.] Have you never seen him
before?

AUSTIN. Never that I can recall. What is his name?

MRS. AUSTIN. I don't know. [To JIM.] What is it?

JIM. Humph! [Hesitating.] He could find out, anyway. Jim Faraday.

AUSTIN. Faraday... it sounds familiar.

JIM. [Grimly.] You've served the trick on a good many, I guess.

AUSTIN. [To Mrs. AUSTIN.] What does he mean?

JIM. Don't you remember the Sisters' Hospital? The fellow that had his eye burned out in the big explosion?

AUSTIN. [Startled.] Oh!

JIM. [Sneeringly.] Ah, yes!

AUSTIN. You are the man?

JIM. I'm the man.

MRS. AUSTIN. Harvey, you took this man some paper to sign.

AUSTIN. Yes... I remember.

MRS. AUSTIN. Did you tell him what was in it?

AUSTIN. [Hesitates.] Why...

MRS. AUSTIN. Answer me, please.

AUSTIN. Why, my dear...

MRS. AUSTIN. Did you tell him what was in it?

AUSTIN. But, my dear, it wasn't my business to tell him.

MRS. AUSTIN. Oh!

AUSTIN. I was representing the company.

MRS. AUSTIN, I see.

AUSTIN. It was his place to see what was in it.

MRS. AUSTIN. Harvey! This man with one eye burned out, and not yet over the accident?

AUSTIN. My dear, you don't understand...

JIM. [Wildly.] You didn't leave me to find out for myself. You lied to me!

MRS. AUSTIN. At least you permitted him to be misled. You did not tell him the honest truth about the paper, and what would be the effect if he signed it.

AUSTIN. My dear, you do not understand. I could not have done that. I was the representative of the interests of the company.

MRS. AUSTIN. And that is the sort of work you do for them?

AUSTIN. That is the sort of work that has to be done. I cannot help it, much as I would like to...

MRS. AUSTIN. [Wildly.] You have done that sort of thing before. And you will do it again!

AUSTIN. My dear...

MRS. AUSTIN. And you take money for it! You bring that money home to me! And you never told me how you got it! You make me sharer in your guilt!

AUSTIN. Helen!

MRS. AUSTIN. This was how you earned your promotion! This was what you came to me and boasted about! This was what we married on. This money ... blood money... that you get for cheating this helpless laborer out of his rights... out of everything he had in the world!

AUSTIN. My dear, you are out of your mind. You do not understand business.

MRS. AUSTIN. I understand it all... a child could understand! It is only you... the rising young lawyer... that doesn't understand! Harvey, Harvey! Do you know what you have done to this man... what you and I together have done to him? We have wrecked his life! We have driven him to hell! We have murdered his wife and his two children. We have turned him into a tramp and a criminal. We have climbed to success on top of him... we have made our fortune out of his blood! This house... this furniture... these pictures... all this beauty and comfort... all this we have coined out of his tears and agony... out of the lives of his sick wife and his two little babies! And you have done this for me... you have made me the cause of it... you have put the guilt of it upon my young life... a thing that I must carry through the world with me until I die!

AUSTIN. [Starting toward her.] Helen!

MRS. AUSTIN. No! Don't touch me! Speak to HIM! It is with him you have to do! What have you to say to him? Don't think about me!

AUSTIN. My dear, be reasonable!

MRS. AUSTIN. What have you to say to him? That is what I want to know! Harvey! Don't you understand it is your character that is up for judgment?

AUSTIN. It can't be as bad as you say.

MRS. AUSTIN. Why can't it? Find out.

AUSTIN. [After a long pause, turns to Jim.] Faraday.

JIM. Well?

AUSTIN. Is what my wife says true?

JIM. It's true.

AUSTIN. You got no damages from the company?

JIM. Didn't you fix it yourself? What do they pay you for?

AUSTIN. And had you no money saved?

JIM. My family had to live on it.

AUSTIN. And didn't you get your job back?

JIM. Until the shut-down, I did.

AUSTIN. Oh, that's so. I forgot that.

JIM. Humph!

AUSTIN. That's too bad. I will have to do something for you.

JIM. Will that bring my wife and babies back to life?

AUSTIN. Oh, your family died! My God... that's terrible! [A pause.] Faraday, I can't help that. What can I do? Listen, man... you see how unhappy my wife is... you don't want to make the thing impossible for me, do you?

JIM. I ain't doing anything.

AUSTIN. Be reasonable, and let me atone for the mistake. We'll say nothing about this... about tonight. We'll start over, and I'll see that you get a good job, and a fair chance.

Jim. Humph!

AUSTIN. Will you do that? I'm honestly sorry about it. And perhaps if I can give you some money for a start..

[Takes out purse.]

JIM. Put up your money. It ain't likely you've got as much there as I'd have got from the company.

AUSTIN. Oh, is that it? Well, maybe that is fair. I'll fix it up with you on that basis.

JIM. And what about the other fellows, hey?

AUSTIN. The other fellows?

JIM. That you've done out the same way you done me. What about Dan Kearney, that lost his life the day after.. and you and the rest of the company sharks fixed it up so that his widow couldn't prove how it was that he got hurt!

MRS. AUSTIN. Harvey!

JIM. Yes, ma'am, they done that. And it ain't the first time they done it, either... nor the last. And they've bought juries... and judges, too, I reckon... there ain't much work of a dirty sort that the Empire Steel Company ain't tried in this city... and you can bet their smart young lawyers know all the game! I'm sorry for you, lady... you're white, and I'd be glad to help you. But I've seen too much of the company and its ways, and I won't lie down and lick its hand... not for any money! I ain't so low I've got the value of my wife and two little babies figured out and ready to hand. I reckon

I'll stay on the outside of the fence and take my chances. I'll wind up in jail, I suppose; but there's many a better man than me done the same. So I guess I'll go, and we'll call it off.

[Starts away.]

MRS. AUSTIN. Harvey!

AUSTIN. My dear...

MRS. AUSTIN. Is that all you can say to him? You will let him go? [To JIM.] Listen to me. You are right. We can never undo what we have done. We cannot repay you. But at least we must do what we can. We cannot let the evil go on. You yourself have no right to do it... you have no right to give up your life.

JIM. I see what you mean, lady; and I'm sorry for you. I'd help you if I could. But it's too late... I know that. There can't anybody save me. I'm rotten... I'm a boozier. I couldn't stop if I wanted to. And I ain't got any reason to want to. I ain't in the running.

MRS. AUSTIN. [Stretching out her arms.] But what can I do?

JIM. You can look after them that ain't down. Look after them that your husband and the rest of the company's sharks will do up tomorrow.

MRS. AUSTIN. No!

JIM. Oh, they'll do it! I know what you mean... you'll make him stop... but they'll have another man in his place. It's a machine. .. it goes right on. Yes, and you won't do as much as you think you will, either... you'll think it over, and you won't go as far as you mean to now.

MRS. AUSTIN. No! No!

JIM. Ah, but you can't help it... you're in the mill, too. It's the class you belong to. You can talk and feel sorry... but you ain't made to do things. You have to have your houses and your fine dresses ... and you couldn't live without them, and there'd be no use your trying. And that means you have to live off my class... you have to ride on our backs. And it don't much matter which part you ride on, as far as I can see. You'll make your husband get a new job, maybe; but he'll do the same thing in another way... only you won't find it out. But any way he gets his money it'll come out of me and my kind. D'y'e see? I do the work... I'm the man underneath. I make the good things, and you get them. [A pause.] Good luck to you.

MRS. AUSTIN. You are cruel.

JIM. Nothing of the kind. I've just told you the facts. I feel sorry for you. I'd do anything I could for you. [Stretching out his hands.] See what I've done! I've given you your husband's life.

MRS. AUSTIN. Oh!

JIM. Yes, just that. You've no idea how many times I swore it... that I'd kill him on sight... that I'd strangle the life out of him, if ever I laid eyes on him again. I used to sit when I was half drunk, and brood over it... my God, I even swore it by the body of my little boy! And I've got my gun, and you've taken his away from him. And I don't shoot him. [A pause.] I leave him to you. [Grimly.] You punish him.

[Exit right.]

[AUSTIN stretches out his arms to his wife. She sinks upon the table, burying her head.]

CURTAIN