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ATOMIC LOVE

A LETTER FOR MISS BILLY

THE NOTCHED EARS

THE BIRTHMARK

EVERY STORY COMPLETE

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READ IN THIS ISSUE:

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ATOMIC LOVE

By PEARL C. DEGENHART

The score stood love—15 when she saw THE BOY for the first time. Needless to say, it remained love from then on

CUPID didn't waste time popping just little arrows at Patsy Culver. For sixteen years he let her believe that the reason for boys being around at all was to have somebody to play tennis with, or to go fishing with, or to fight with. Then, all of a sudden, Cupid let loose, not with an arrow, but with a bomb that practically changed Pat's whole cell structure.

Pat was in the middle of a whoop-de-do tennis match with her brother, Tom, when Cupid opened his bomb bay. The two Culvers were playing for strictly high stakes, who'd do the Saturday shopping for Mom for the next month. Pat had won the first set by a squeak. Tom was nosing her out in the second. It was a close deal but Pat figured to win one way or another. She had to. She needed time on Saturdays to go fishing on the bay with her Uncle Toppy.

It was Pat's serve. She'd ace old Tom. He was a pushover for a low ball. He usually watched them go by with that "It can't happen to me" expression.

"Ready?" Pat called.

"Yep."

Pat got her feet planted just right and started to raise her racket when, for some reason, she happened to glance over at the spectator bench and saw THE BOY. It may have been the easy way he leaned his tall form against the bench or how the sun shone on his red hair. Anyway, Pat's heart stood dead still for a minute, then it began to do some sort of a wild dance routine. Her knees acted like jello on a hot stove.

"Hey, Droop. What's holding you back? I said I was ready."

Pat's love struck arm was weak, and a slow, feeble ball floated away from her racket.

"Banzai," Tom howled, and smashed it back.

Pat let it go past without even a try.

"Love for you, fifteen for me," Tom's voice was like a siren.

Pat saw the boy glance languidly in their direction. She whirled away from him, and bent herself over like a deformed creature, trying to hide herself, pretending she was looking for the ball. Why had she worn her old, faded slacks and torn sweater? Jeeps, she must look like a sure droop. She'd have to get off the court, and quick.

"Get going with the ball," Tom was impatient.

Pat bent over far enough to see through her legs that they were no longer observed. She straightened up and threw the ball to Tom.

"I'm quitting. I'm tired."

"Quitting? Did it raise such a big blister, Sister, just because I hit one itty, bitty ball?"

"I'll forfeit," Pat said hastily.

"I'll say you will, you—you—, pip squeak, you."

Ordinarily those would have been fighting words, but now Pat took them meekly.

"Take a drink of water and swallow yourself, Pill," Tom hollered after her as she scuttled off the court like a hunted thing.

Pat made a streak for home and up to her room.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall," she cried out as she peered into the glass. "And I look just like the witch," she mourned. "Stringy hair, face as red as a T-bone steak. If only I looked like Loid Dotz. — Even Dorothy Lamour!"

Even as she spoke Pat's own image seemed to fade and that of Loid Dotz appeared in the silvery depths of the mirror. Yes, there she was, in flimsy gown, every shining curl in place, creamy complexion, long lashes guarding sparkling eyes. Once Pat had thought Loid wacky for being so perfect, but now she remembered the forward surge of the stag line when Loid made an entrance. She sighed in envy.

She looked closer and her own poor face stared back at her. Golly, even her neck was dirty. She put up a hand to brush away a little tear of self pity. Torn, jagged finger nails reflected in the glass.

"It's no use. I'm so utterly ugly," she wailed.

But Cupid wasn't ready for retreat. He leaned close and whispered to the despairing girl,

"If you would be like Loid Dotz,
A bath will help,
And a curl in your locks,
A pretty dress. Clean bobby socks."

Patsy strove hard and long to get sixteen years of tom boy out of her system and let the lady within her take hold. She scrubbed until her skin shone, curled her hair, and put on gobs of make up.

She took a long look at the brown curls piled high, and her little pert face whitened now with powder until it resembled nothing

so much as a mask with sunken heavy lidded eyes and a red blotch for the mouth. Well, now, she might not be as perfect as Loid, but she wasn't bad, not bad at all.

"Cripes," Tom cried when he came home and saw her get-up,

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall," she cried out as she peered into the glass. "And I look just like the witch," she mourned.

"You look like a clown or something."

"You don't know glamour when you see it," Pat told him.

"Glamour," he snorted. "Say, speaking of glamour, Harriet Lang is giving a party for that red headed cousin of hers. She wanted me to bring you, but I said you never went to parties."

Red headed cousin. Pat's heart turned over. It must be HIM!

"You said——," she exploded, "since when do you decide what I'm going to do. I'll go to that party, see?"

"Not with me you won't, sister. Not after the way you walked out on that tennis game."

"I'm sorry, Tom, but I didn't feel so sharp. Please take me to the party. I'll even wash dishes alone for a month if you do."

Tom pondered for a minute or two then he said, "Nope, the dishes are out. But I'll tell you what I will do. I'll play you another tennis match right now. If you win I'll take you to the party, and if I win you wash dishes a month, and also clean my room for six months."

"Why, you lug, what kind of a lame brain do you think I've got? Besides, I don't play tennis anymore."

Tom shrugged his shoulders. "Okay. That's my prop. Take it or leave it."

Pat hedged. "I'll clean your room for three months and no tennis."

"Nope. Tennis or nothing."

"Are Harriet and her cousin still at the tennis courts?"

"It won't do you any good to talk to Harriet. Besides, they went home when I did."

Good, Pat thought, I can play this one match, and he won't see me. Then I can renounce tennis and other unladylike acts forever.

"It's a deal, Tom. Wait until I put on my slacks again."

"Make it snap, Sister. And if you run out on me again—"

Pat came downstairs in her old outfit. But she hadn't bothered to take the makeup off. She wanted to get the match over, and get away from the tennis courts as quickly as possible.

"Aren't you going to take that stuff off your face?" Tom asked.

"No. I'm in a hurry." Pat answered shortly.

As they hurried along toward the courts Pat asked nonchalantly, "Who is this cousin of Harriet's?"

"Name's Dean Lang."

"Just visiting?"

"Going to live here, I guess. Why?"

"No reason." Pat almost sang the words. Dean. What a scrumptious name. Dean and Patricia. What a combination. Why, it was, well, phonetic, to say the least. Tomorrow she'd wear that new red dress Mom was always trying to get her to put on. It was just the right color to go with his hair. She'd sweep into Har-

riet's living room, a little late, of course. He'd press her hand in his own strong one and whisper, "You're beautiful tonight, Patricia."

But at the court Pat put her whole mind on the game. She had to win. The brilliance of her playing startled even herself. It kept Tom sweating and puffing trying to keep up with her nasty serves and her wicked returns.

She won the first set, six-three.

"Let's rest." Tom panted.

"Nothing doing. I want to get this over with."

"Well, you don't need to kill yourself and me, too."

"This is the last tennis match I'm ever going to play, and I want to finish it, and now."

"All right, Tiger Woman, if that's the way you want it."

The next set was played in grim determination by both Culvers. Tom became as imbued with the will to win as Pat. They kept each other running up and down the court like mad men. Pat's chest felt as if it might explode at any minute, but the harder she played the harder Tom went at it. But Pat kept a little ahead of him. When the game score stood five-four for Pat it was her turn to serve. She could win on her own nerve. She'd go to the party all right.

Her first serve aced Tom as neat as you please. Pat's grin widened. In the groove, no less. Another whizzed by him. Another and still another. Yippee!

"Game, set," Pat whooped.

She galloped to the net. "Well, brother, I guess you take me to the party," she fairly bellowed.

Tom had a forlorn look on his face until he happened to glance square at Pat. His mouth curved into a grin and then he began to laugh. "Ho, ho, ho," he shouted and bent double with mirth.

"What's the matter with you?" Pat asked bewildered.

"Your glamour," Tom gasped in between guffaws, "It's run all over your face. You look like a wild Indian."

Before Pat could think of a stinging reply Tom looked beyond her and waved his racket, "Hi, Dean," he called, "come here and see something funny."

Dean. Patsy withered and aged like a flower before frost. She could not turn or even move as she heard footsteps behind her. It was all over now. He was coming to laugh at her.

'This is my sis. Isn't she a grim looking character?" Tom's eyes were streaming with laughter.

Dean stepped in front of her. Pat's heart flip flopped again at the sight of him. Oh, why had she ever come here? She hated her brother at that moment.

But Dean wasn't laughing. He was gazing at Pat with genuine admiration in his eyes.

"Say," he said with enthusiasm,

(*continued on page* 35)

A letter for Miss Billy

By MICHAEL CROWLEY

There were disadvantages corresponding with a woman named Billy. Especially when you meant business.

Miss Billy Thornton
Hotel Fitzroy
New York City
Dear Miss Billy:

This here is the monthly report, only this month there ain't a deal to report, as things have been purty humdrum in this section for the month.

There ain't been the usual passel of trials and trubbles such as the Lord usual puts to the mortal lot of man to bare. So far as the T-Bar-T goes, there ain't been a cow lost that I know about. Neether has any of the fence give way to the workings of Providence, such as wire being down,

or posts rotted away, or the like. Neether has there been any trubble with any of the hands. Neether have the same been complaining as usual, such as getting tired of beans and the like, and wanting fine food like they never knowed at home.

Everything looks fine for the fall shipping, better than at any time since your dad past away to his reward. I think you'll make a killing this year if the market holds up, tho, of corse, you can't count on the same, so don't plan ahead to that effect.

Mabel Jennings rid past on that paint hoss of hers the other day, and she lighted long enuf to ask after you, and to allow she was aiming to rite you. I made out like I never had your address, and she rid off not knowing no more than when she come. I figgered you wouldn't take it kindly having all the riff-raff in the valley bothering your correspondence, even if Mabel was your best chum. I figger there's such a thing as not bothering your equals, you being a lady now, with city friends and the like. Tho God knows there ain't a finer set of womanhood anywheres than rite here in Marbel Valley, any dudes to the contrary.

Besides, I reckon you're too busy, what with going places, and your brilyant frends and the like. So don't feel duty bound to anser these reports like you been doing, tho I'm sure glad to git your letters, you being like a dawter to me since you was knee-high in dresses.

As ever,
Jacob Bomms,
Your forman, T-Bar-T,
R.F.D. Box 8,
Klanso, Arizona.

●

HOTEL FITZROY
New York City

Dear Jake:

I received your letter, and was glad to hear from you, not only for the report on the T-Bar-T, but because I miss you a very great deal, because you're the only family I have left now, except for Aunt Tulia and Uncle Jems.

I am glad to hear that everything is going so well at the T-Bar-T, but please don't wait to send a monthly report, but write to me a lot. Answer this letter NOW.

Yes, it is true that I am a lady now, and that I have lots of brilliant friends, or rather I will have, when Aunt Tulia and Uncle Jems and I get acquainted. So far all we know are one or two old fussbudgets that live at the hotel, that Aunt Julia got acquainted with in the lobby. But, Jake, you should have given Mabel my address. I am just crazy to hear from her, and from everybody in Marble Valley who will write. So tell her to write at once. Because,

though I *am* busy, and though I *am* having a wonderful time, I have time to answer all letters, and I really want to hear from my old friends.

I can't begin to tell of all the whirl of things we are doing. I go every day to the big library. You've never seen anything like it. There's thousands and thousands of books. I get some book, and sit there all afternoon reading. Sometimes I just read a love story, which is my favorite kind of story, but lately I have been reading western stories. I realize now that Marble Valley is an awfully dull ranch country, because nothing ever happens there like in other parts of the west. The only thing I ever remember that was anyways exciting was when Charlie Thomas shot up the Mains Hotel. Do you remember? But even that was kind of stupid alongside of what's happening other places, and besides he only did it because he was drunk.

Then, other things we do, as I have mentioned before, are to get on some of the big sight-seeing buses. There's thousands of things to see, and all so different and exciting. We went through Chinatown last week for the first time, and you never saw so many Chinamen. It was just crowded.

I am very careful when I go anywhere alone, because in a city there are people waiting around to lure girls. I am very watchful, and if I see anybody that I think is following me, I go into some big store, and wait until I think they have given up. I bought myself a little gun, which I carry in my purse.

An awful embarrassing thing happened the third day here, which I haven't told you about. I was in the lobby of our hotel, and the slickest looking, smoothest man came up to me, and said:

"Miss Thornton, I am very happy you are with us, and I shall see that you have a comfortable stay."

Well, I didn't know he was just Mr. Benton, the hotel manager, and I told him that I was armed, and if he ever said another word to me I'd shoot him dead. It was terribly humiliating. Now he speaks politely, but looks at me in the funniest way.

Are the wildflowers still blooming over north of the creek? That was alway my favorite spot.

Lovingly,

Billy.

●

Miss Billy Thornton
Hotel Fitzroy
New York City

Dear Miss Billy:

Yours received of even date, and I am ansering right now, as you wanted. Which I am certainly glad to do, as you know, I am interested in your welfare, and besides it is kind of lonely, without no one here no more.

I am sorry I blundered in re-

gards to Mabel, and I will tell her to rite you, as you sed. I ain't seen her since your letter come, but when I see her I will tell her.

What you say about Marble Valley is only half true. What you read about in books is places where there is a new rush to a place, bringing in tinhorns, drifters and riffraff, looking for new land or gold or such. Or where something brings a crowd of nesters or sheepmen or other trash, looking to do cowmen out of there rites. Marble Valley is kind of settled on strate and narrow lines, and the folks here knows that there neybor is a hard man, and it's best not to edge onto there rites. For that reason it's peaceful, but there's no telling when a push of bad ones might come in and stir up trubble. You would find Marble Valley folks ready to deal out plenty then.

That reminds me, you know the old G-F Outfit? That's been took over by a furriner named Billy Rimms, who maybe you have heared of. He was knowed as Billy-be-damned over in Markson County, where he owned a spread. He is a nice feller, but I expect to have trubble with him sooner or later, as he is a hard man.

He is well liked around so far, as he seems to tend to his own business quiet. He has curly hair, and all the single girls in the valley is sweet on him, and I ain't even sure but what some of the married ones is a little too doggone approving of him for good taste. However, he is a woman hater, for he has a way of speaking disrespectful of women as squaws, and refusing to have nothing to do with them. There has been some whining among the better elements about him speaking of females in such a way, but for my part I figger, after all, it's his own opinyon.

In regards to the Chinymen, which you mentioned, I advise you to have nothing whatever to do with them, for at best they are heathen, and if they once git the upper hand there is no living with them. Afore I come to your dad, I worked for a outfit that had one cooking, and he got so none of the boys cood so much as step foot near the kitchen, or he wood run at them with a butcher knife, jabbering till your ears wood give.

You done rite, Billy, in calling the bluff of this skunk of a hotel manager, tho if you had drawed your gun and blowed his hed off, you wood of been justified. For that kind is never cured, unless they git their branes blowed out, which is proved, like you say, by the way he is still leering and gawping at you wherever you go. I have showed this part of your letter to one or two of the hands, and they are some worked up, and allow hanging is too good for this skunk.

I have took the matter into my

own hands, and have rote this dude a plane letter, telling him to leave you alone, or I will come back there and settle personal. Or I will send a new man I got, named Eddie Mort, for he knows more about big town ways, having served some years for manslaughter back East. He is a hair-trigger gunman, and used to be a criminal.

About the wildflowers, I rid over to the north bank of the crick, and they are still blooming, jest as you expected. They are purtier than I ever seen them, save for the wet year we had five years ago. Too bad you can't be here to enjoy them, tho, of corse, I know you are having too good a time to ever come back to a humdrum place like Marble Valley.

As ever,
Jacob Bomms,
Your forman, T-Bar-T,
R.F.D. Box 8,
Klanso, Arizona.

●

Mr. Benton
Hotel Manager
Hotel Fitzroy
New York City
Dear Sir:

You are a skunk. Don't think, jest becaws you are callus, and becaws you think you are safe, that you can play fast and loose, without meeting your just desserts.

I am a peaceable, law abiding man, but there is a time in every man's life when he has got to take the law into his own hands, to pertect his loved ones.

I refer to Miss Billy Thornton, who is one of our local women, and who you have been pestering.

Don't think you can hide yourself behind the pertection of the law, for I have a man here, who is named Eddie Mort, who has jest got out of jail after being a criminal some years, and killing a man, and he knows all the ins and outs of the law, and is also a dead shot.

There are others here, too, who are jest as tuff as you, and they are some worked up about this insult. Hanging is too good for you.

So take a warning, and stop this gawping and leering like you been doing, or it will be jest too bad.

Yours as ever,
Jacob Bomms,
Forman, T-Bar-T,
R.F.D. Box 8,
Klanso, Arizona.

●

HOTEL FITZROY
New York City
Dear Jake:

Why oh why did you ever write that awful letter to Mr. Benton? You misunderstood my letter completely. What I said was that I had thought Mr. Benton was annoying me, but he really was only being nice. You see, it was

my fault. I insulted Mr. Benton when he was welcoming me to the hotel.

When I got your letter, I hurried right out to find him. He had just read what you had written him, and he was very much upset, as he feared it was the work of what he called "a dangerous crank." I tried to explain as best I could, how you had misunderstood what I had written you, and how you had always been like a father to me, and how I would write you right away and set the thing straight with you, so that there would be no chance of your coming here to cause any trouble.

You don't know how humiliated I was, especially because I had threatened to shoot him, and then you writing him and threatening him, too. I don't know what he thinks of me.

He was very kind about it all, and said he understood, but he was very nervous about it all, and asked me to write and set the matter straight with you.

So, Jake, read this letter carefully, and tell the other boys you showed my other letter to, about how it all was a mistake.

Lovingly,
Billy.

●

Miss Billy Thornton
Hotel Fitzroy
New York City
Dear Miss Billy:

I am mighty sorry about the letter I rote the dude, for as you know I woodn't do nothing to humiliate you. I wood rather lose my right arm first. I can see now where I read your letter wrong, and that's where the mistake come in. But, Billy, you are an innocent and unsuspecting girl, and are liable to let your better nature run away with your judgment, so I am giving you a peece of advice, to wit, don't trust none of them dudes, but be on your guard, and let this Benton see that you mean business.

I have rote the dude an apology by letter, and this should clear the matter up rite, which I hope it will do.

To turn to business matters of the T-Bar-T, there has been a little deal come up, which needs your O.K., and which I am referring to you. Do you remember I told you some time ago about a furriner named Billy-be-damned Rimms which has took over the old G-F, having moved in from Markson County, where he lived most of his life, and was knowed as a tuff customer?

Well, this Billy Rimms has been fixing up on the G-F, such as putting in new outbuildings and the like, corrals and so on, due to the fact that the old G-F was purty bad run down, and Billy Rimms has been to me about buying the stand of timber to the north of the crick on your land. He is aiming to cut and

haul it, and use it for the new building he's doing. I have told him that you was the owner, and I give him your address for him to rite you about it, which I opine he has already done.

He offered five hundred dollars, which I think is a good price for the same, so if you do, all you need to do is anser his letter to that effect. There is one thing, tho, which he and me did not go into, but which you had better put in your letter, and that is try to git him to agree to pull the stumps as part of the deal. You can git a lawyer to draw up the contract, or let me know and I will git one here.

As ever,
Jacob Bomms,
Your forman, T-Bar-T,
R.F.D. Box 8,
Klanso, Arizona

P.S.— Billy Rimm's letter will come to you addressed to Mr. Billy Thornton, instead of Miss, for as I know Billy Rimms to be a woman hater I never told him that you was a woman, or the deal wood have been off. You had better tell the postmaster not to send the letter back when he sees the mister, that you are waiting for the same.

J. B.

●

Mr. Benton
Hotel Manager
Hotel Fitzroy
New York City
Dear Sir:

I am riting you about a letter which I rote you some days ago in which I told you plane what a skunk you was, and how you had better leave Miss Billy Thornton alone, or it wood be too bad for you.

I have since receeved a letter from Miss Billy herself in which she says that you ain't as bad as you are painted, and for that reason I am riting to apologize for warning you jest what will happen if you bother Miss Billy any more.

I want to thank you for the kind word you said about me to Miss Billy, about me being a dangerous crank, and I will say it is true, and that I wood be ready any minute to jump a trane, and come back there, if anybody shood try any of there wiles on Miss Billy.

As ever,
Jacob Bomms
Forman, T-Bar-T,
R.F.D. Box 8,
Klanso, Arizona.

●

Mr. Billy Thornton
Hotel Fitzroy
New York City
New York
Deer Frend:

I understand you are the owner of the T-Bar-T, fer I was tawking to your forman, Jacob Bomms, and he said you was, and that I was to write you about

the stand of timber north of the crick on your place.

Now as you know, this patch ain't worth much, fer the trees is very narled and crooked, and the wood is full of nots. Besides, some of the trees is so large they will be hard to handle.

All I could use them fer would be to cut them into ruff timber, fer some improvements I am making on the G-F ranch, of which I am the owner. I would just have to cut them ruff into rails, poles, and the like.

There is a feller over north of me who has a fine patch of timber, who is offering it very cheap, but as it is a little further to haul, I am ready to buy yours if the price is low enuf.

I am ready to offer you as high as $500 fer the same, which I will have to drag myself, which is pretty expensive work, as you know.

You will have to agree to let me cut the line fence, and I will put in a temporary gate, which I will be willing to leave there free of charge after the work is done, or I will take it out, and replace the fence.

So as I say, I will pay you $500 fer a quick deal, so answer me at once, if you are interested.

Yours respectfully,
Billy Rimms
R. F. D. Box 3,
Klanso, Arizona.

●

HOTEL FITZROY
New York City

Dear Jake:

This is just to let you know that I received your letter that you were writing an apology to Mr. Benton, and to tell you how fine of you I think that is. Father always said that the man who would admit his mistakes and repair the damage was a man to reckon with.

I received the letter you told me about, the one from Mr. Billy Rimms, and I don't like him at all. All he did in his letter was to keep running down our ranch. I hate that kind of a person. I hate anybody who is always criticizing and complaining. I had half a mind not to answer him, but as you said it was a good deal to make, I sent him the contracts, along with a very dignified and aloof letter. I was going to have a lawyer draw the contracts, but Uncle Jems said he knew a lot about it, so I let him draw them.

If you see Mabel, tell her to write me. Also anybody else in Marble Valley.

Lovingly,
Billy.

●

Mr. Billy Thornton
Hotel Fitzroy
New York City
New York

Deer Frend:

I have signed the contracts you sent, and am sending you one of

them. Tho you put nothing in about cutting the line fence, I am taking it to mean you agree, and am starting work today. Here is my check for $500.

Yours respectfully,
Billy Rimms
R. F. D. Box 3,
Klanso, Arizona

●

HOTEL FITZROY
New York City

Dear Jake:

I have just had an awful thought. I am writing you at once about it. Has this Billy Rimms person started cutting our trees yet? You know he was going to put a gate in the line fence between the G-F and the T-Bar-T, and that will be just south of the trees. What I want to know is, will this gate be placed so that he will drag the trees over the field of wildflowers? Answer me at once. If so, then tell him that he will have to drag the trees around the flowers, because I don't intend to let him or anyone else destroy them.

In haste,
Lovingly,
Billy.

●

Miss Billy Thornton
Hotel Fitzroy
New York City

Dear Miss Billy:

In regards to your letter of even date, Billy Rimms as per contract has put a gate in the line fence, and is already got some men cutting the trees.

In regards to the wildflowers, now, Miss Billy, you know there ain't no way for Billy Rimms to drag them trees, after he cuts them, except across the wildflower field. As you know, there ain't no gate to connect the T-Bar-T and the G-F except the gate which Billy Rimms has put in, and if he couldn't drag the trees across the wildflowers he wood have to drag them around by the road, which wood make a haul of a good ten miles to his place, or he wood have to cut our fence in at least two more places, and put in gates, which is too much to ask of any man, much less of a man as tuff and hair-trigger as Billy Rimms is knowed to be. Furthermore, Billy Rimms already seems to be at sixes and sevens, do to some trubble he has been having over the line fence between his G-F and the Martin Outfit, and his temper is on the prod anyhows, as you wood know if you cood see him cussing and snarling at the men who is cutting the trees.

Now, Miss Billy, as you know and I know, you never used to be so tender of wildflowers when you was here on the T-Bar-T, for, as you know, the same is not regarded much more than as weeds by the folks hereabouts, save maybe to say the wildflowers

is purty this year, and so on.

Besides, there is hundreds of the same scattered around these parts, and it's not like this patch was the only ones to be seen. Likewise, there will be a new crop next year in the spring, even if Billy Rimms does tramp down a few, dragging his trees out. Also, you are not intending probably to come here in time to see or smell these, and I am sure neether myself nor the hands will care if a few are tramped down by Billy Rimms.

Furthermore, they are almost all gone to seed, and it is only do to it being an unusual year that they are not gone long ago. So I am sure you will not mind if Billy Rimms tramps down a few, for they will soon be gone anyhows.

I don't know why you are worrying your purty head about wildflowers way out here. My advice to you, for as you know you are like a dawter to me, is to forget about the flowers and Billy Rimms, and go on having your good times in town.

As ever,
Jacob Bomms,
Your forman, T-Bar-T,
R. F. D. Box 8,
Klanso, Arizona.

●

HOTEL FITZROY
New York City

Mr. Jacob Bomms
R. F. D. Box 8
Klanso, Ariz.

Dear Sir:

So you, too, have turned against me. I might have known. You are always talking and pretending how much you think of me, and how you are always so ready to protect me, and then, when I need you, when some smarty like this Billy Rimms comes along, and starts running things his way, and making fun of the ranch, then you just curl up. You don't care what he does to the ranch. You are scared of him. You are scared of Billy Rimms. And I thought you were brave. I am so mad I could scream.

I have taken things into my own hands. I have written Billy Rimms to get off of the T-Bar-T, and stay off.

I do not want to be like a daughter to you, and I haven't a pretty head, and I'm not going to have a good time!

Very truly yours,
(Miss) Billy Thornton.

●

HOTEL FITZROY
New York City

Mr. Billy Rimms
R. F. D. Box 3
Klanso, Ariz.

Dear Sir:

This is to let you know that you had better stay off of the T-Bar-T, if you know what is good for you. There is a law against tres-

passing.

I understand you are on my place, ruining it. I will give you two days to get your minions off of my land, and repair my fence as good as new, or it will be worse for you.

Very truly yours,
Billy Thornton.

●

Mr. Billy Thornton
Hotel Fitzroy
New York City
New York.
Deer Frend:

I have read your letter of latest date, and I think you are crazy. If you are not crazy, then you are crooked, and trying to put over some game.

You forget I have got your contract and likewise the check which you cashed for $500, giving me the rite to go on your land.

I am too busy to go into this further, but I will add that you better give up this idea of acting like a dam fool, or you will be making trouble between us.

Yours respectfully,
Billy Rimms
R. F. D. Box 3,
Klanso, Arizona.

P.S.— I don't know about any minions being on your land, but if there are any I did not put them there, nor do they belong to me.

B. R.

●

HOTEL FITZROY
New York City

Mr. Billy Rimms
R. F. D. Box 3
Klanso, Ariz.
Dear Sir:

So you think you can scare me, too, with your cheap tricks, and your cursing and sneering. You think you are pretty smart, don't you? Well, you will find that there are some that are not afraid of you, or all of your bullying, cowardly crew.

I hate you, and I also have contempt for you, and I look upon you as a coward and a sneak. I also despise you for being a foreigner, and pushing into Marble Valley, where you are not wanted.

Maybe the men around Marble Valley are afraid of you, and think you are tough, and are afraid to protect their womenfolk from being called names by you, but thank God I am not afraid to speak out, and tell you what a hateful, mean bully you are.

I am also mad at you for saying dirty, spiteful things about the T-Bar-T, which you did in your letter to me.

So you had better get off of the T-Bar-T at once, for I am not joking, and I am going to see this thing through.

I am not going to have you tramping out my wildflowers with your dirty boots.

Very truly yours,
Billy Thornton.

Mr. Billy Thornton
Hotel Fitzroy
New York City
New York.
Deer Frend:

You are a liar, and you rite like an old woman.

There is no use just sending polite letters back and forth, which is getting us nowhere. I am getting sick and tired of your insults. I am coming to town to break your neck.

Yours respectfully,
Billy Rimms
R. F. D. Box 3
Klanso, Arizona.

●

Miss Billy Thornton
Hotel Fitzroy
New York City
Dear Miss Billy:

I am sorry you took my letter in a spirit in which I certainly never ment it to be rote.

I am not scared of Billy Rimms nor of any man, tho, if there was any man I wood be liable to be feared of, it wood be Billy Rimms, for he is a hard man.

I am sorry you rote Billy Rimms, for I have always sed that the leest sed the soonest mended.

I feel very bad about the hole thing, but mainly I am sorry becaws you are mad at me, as you have always been to me like my own dawter.

As ever,
Jacob Bomms,
Your forman, T-Bar-T,
R. F. D. Box 8,
Klanso, Arizona.

P. S.— I rid over to the north of the crick, and the wildflowers is all done for, not becaws of Billy Rimms, but jest do to nature. They lasted unusual long this year, which was too bad.

J. B.

●

HOTEL FITZROY
New York City
Dear, dear Jake:

Of course I am not mad at you, and never was, really. I was just a little peeved at you because you wouldn't stop Billy Rimms from trampling on my wildflowers.

I suppose you know by this time that Billy Rimms has left town, but I will bet you never knew where he was going, did you?

Well, he was coming here, because he thought I was a man, and he was going to shoot me or something for sassing him.

We have had the most exciting time in the hotel.

It happened the night Billy got in. You know how tall and handsome he is, and how much of a man he looks like, and everything.

Well, he came into the lobby of the hotel, wearing his gun in plain sight, and I don't know why he didn't get arrested on the way.

Anyway, I was sitting in the

lobby, listening to Aunt Tulia talking with some of the stuffy old people she knows here, and feeling very bored and lonely, for I am awfully tired of the old city, which I never did like, and there is nothing to do here, and nobody worth knowing. I hate it.

I knew who Billy was right away, for he had written me he was coming. But of course he didn't know who I was, for he thought I was a man, as you know.

Well, anybody could see that he was there for no good, for you know what an imposing person he is, and what a hero he looks like.

Anyway, Mr. Benton, the manager, was in the lobby near the desk, talking to a group of city fromps, and all dressed up in evening clothes, and showing off generally.

Mr. Benton saw Billy come in, and when he saw what he looked like he turned kind of pale, and started trying to edge away from the people he was talking to.

Billy went up to the desk, and when the clerk asked him what he wanted, he said he didn't mind saying he was looking for a certain coyote that needed killing.

Before he could say anything more, Mr. Benton let out a yell, and started down the lobby toward the elevators, hollering "Help."

That started an awful mixup, and everybody started running in different directions, but Billy had seen Mr. Benton start to run away, and he took him for me, so he started after him, yelling to him to face it like a man.

Mr. Benton reached the elevators, but all of them were at other floors, so he started up the stairway with Billy after him.

As soon as I got my wits, I hurried after them, and followed them as they ran all over the hotel. Finally they got up to the roof, where Mr. Benton jumped through a skylight, and got away.

Then the police came and arrested Billy, and we had an awful time explaining. Finally Mr. Benton agreed to drop any charges if Billy would pay for the skylight and if Aunt Tulia, Uncle Jems and I would leave the hotel.

We have. We are all leaving the city tonight for Klanso, and you can look forward to being foreman of the G-F as well as the T-Bar-T.

I love Billy dearly, and I am so happy.

Lovingly,
(Mrs.) Billy (Rimms)

There are men who praise no action that they are not themselves able to imitate.

—Cicero

THE NOTCHED EARS

By JOHN D. MACDONALD

Calcutta, the fabulous city, plays host to this strange adventure of an American man of science and the mystery of the notched ears

DR. Gregory Hewson shortened his long angular stride in order to keep step with the white clad figure of his chubby friend, A. Kahn Haidari of the Calcutta Police, as they walked down a corridor of the Indian General Hospital of Calcutta. Even though it was quite early in the morning, Dr. Hewson's seersucker suit was plastered to him with perspiration generated by the humid heat of Calcutta in the monsoon season.

"But, Gregory, my friend. I cannot understand how you have induced me to bring you here. It isn't as though you were a medical man. You are an anthropologist and a psychologist. If the department should hear of my bringing you here to see one of these strange cases of mutilation, I would be subjected to criticism."

"Look, Kahn. What you told me last night at dinner about these screwy cases interested me. Nobody is going to object. Just relax. I want to see this fellow that got chopped up. After all, I've got to do something until my ship arrives. The department I was working for has folded completely. You are a good enough friend to keep me from going crazy in this heat by giving me something to think about, aren't you?"

"I suppose I will have to be. There is no resisting you, my friend. Here is the ward." They walked from the hall into a large room lined on both sides by beds placed closely together. All of the beds were filled with patients of all shades of Oriental and Indian color. A. Kahn Haidari stopped by the bed of a lean intelligent looking Indian. He looked as though he belonged to a hill country race.

Gregory leaned forward and said, "Urdu bolta hai?"

The man smiled up at him and said, "Yes, sahib, I speak Urdu, but my English is good. It will be

easier for you. Speak in English."

"Thank you. I would like to hear how you received these wounds. Mr. Haidari tells me that you were walking peaceably out in the Tollygunge section and you were attacked. Did you see those who attacked you?"

"No, sahib. I saw no one. There was merely a great blow on my head. The next I remember, I awoke in a field near an English club with these many wounds. I was weak from loss of blood, but I crawled to the English club and they obtained help for me. Now I grow rapidly well."

"You were in a Japanese prison in Rangoon?"

"Yes, sahib. I was captured while serving with the British Fourteenth Army. I was liberated by that same army after many months in prison. I recovered in hospital here in Calcutta and was released last week. I was attacked while trying to find a cousin I have not seen in a great many years."

Gregory spoke in an undertone to Haidari, "If it can be arranged, I would like to see his wounds."

Haidari shrugged his shoulders and cast a helpless look at the ceiling. "I have done this much, I may as well do all. Nurse! Come here, please. My colleague wishes to inspect this man's wounds."

The Indian nurse bent over the bed, and with deft gentle hands removed the bandages which covered the man's upper arm, the outside of his thigh and the outside of the calf of his leg, all on the right side. Then she went around the bed and started to

"Crawl out, Sahib." The words sounded as though his jailor had little English. Gregory had great difficulty crawling with his hands lashed together.


TOAN

remove similar bandages on the man's left side.

Haidari interrupted, "Never mind, Nurse. Just the left ear. Gregory, all of those wounds on the left side are identical to the ones on the right. Now, look here. See there are two deep longitudinal cuts on the upper arm about four inches long. Three similar ones on the thigh and only one on the calf. They are all about one inch deep and appear to have been made with a razor or scalpel. Come around here and look at that ear. See, the top quarter of the ear has been completely slashed away. It is gone."

Gregory whistled in surprise and said, "Do you mean to tell me that the eight people who have also been mutilated in this fashion have had indentical marks?"

"Identical, except for the fact that the number of longitudinal cuts on the arms and legs vary in each instance, but there is always at least one, never more than three. Two of the victims died because too long a time elapsed between when they were cut and when they received aid."

Grgory looked at his watch and said hurriedly, "Thanks, Kahn, but I've got to run and see the American consul at ten. Something about a passport. But I want a chance to go over the other facts of this case with you. Suppose you let me buy you lunch at Firpo's. Can you be there at twelve-thirty just inside the front door? Good! See you then." And the bushy-haired figure of the young American disappeared out the door of the ward. Haidari and the man on the bed looked at each other with that sad, amused expression which means, all over the world, "These Americans!"

The huge upstairs dining room at Firpo's was crowded, and they had to wait for nearly ten minutes for a table. Gregory stood and watched that dizzy expanse of whirling fans which covered the ceiling, and envied Haidari's cool costume—a white linen shirt with the tail hanging outside his thin white cotton pants. At last they were seated. A turbaned waiter took their order and Gregory began the second phase of his inquisition.

"Let's do it this way, Kahn. I'll go over the facts that you have given me, and you stop me if I'm wrong."

"That will be excellent, but there are not many facts available. Start, please."

"Fact number one is that all of the nine people who have been chopped up in your fair city spent some time as guests of the Japanese in one of their prisons in or near Rangoon."

"Right."

"All of the victims state that they were very poorly treated during the first half of their imprisonment, culminating in a series of beatings which nearly

killed them. They remember little about that period, in fact, being conscious so little of the time."

"Right again."

"Then they were well treated for the balance of their confinement."

"That is what they have all said."

"But the fact that intrigues me the most is that they all claim to have received a small notch in the top of the left ear. Right on top, in fact. A notch about a quarter of an inch deep and the same amount wide. Now all of those notches are gone. Slashed off. What do you make of that?"

"As I have told you before, I make nothing of it. I cannot understand it."

"And that takes care of everything we know?"

"It does. There is nothing else to go on. Even if we find ten more persons on whom the same violence has been used we will learn no more, I think."

For many minutes Gregory sat in silence, his brow furrowed. From time to time he would run his brown hand through his dark mop of hair. Then he looked up again. "You say that three of the victims were Europeans?"

"Three were. Two were British subjects resident out here. We call them domiciled Europeans. The third was a Greek who was caught in Burma but who had previously lived for many years in Calcutta."

"Have you checked their stories of the prison camps with other released persons?"

"But of course. The stories agree."

"Could these people have traded a promise to work for Japan after the war for good treatment while in prison? Could the notched ear have been a warning?"

"That was considered, but all of these people are most emphatic about their loyalty to India and their hatred of the Japanese. I, for one, believe them. They are all bewildered by what has happened to them."

"Did you ever hear of a notched ear being used to mark agents employed by the Japanese?"

"No. The only mark we know of was used in North Burma. It was a deep cut between the thumb and first finger. The scar, a white line, helped our military in segregating those who worked as agents. Many of them are now in the Red Fort in Old Delhi. It will be a long time before they walk as free men again."

"Is there any remote chance of this mutilation having anything to do with religious fanatics or political matters?"

"About politics, I cannot say. About religion I can say definitely no. It has been my affair for many years to know all aspects of religious conflict here in Bengal Province. This trouble does not fit with the facts I have accumulated."

"Well, Kahn, I'm stopped cold. It doesn't make sense." Gregory shrugged his shoulders and shook his head in bewilderment.

"You know as much as I do, and your guesses will be as good as mine until we get more facts. But understand, Gregory, that you must not talk of this, only to me. Now we must wait for something more to develop."

"Waiting will get you nowhere, only more hospital cases and deaths. Why not figure out a plan to trap those who are doing the mutilations?" Gregory's voice was eager.

"A plan! But how?"

"Get a good idea of what those original notches looked like, and notch up a couple of your huskier policemen. Send them out armed to wander the streets out of uniform."

"Oh, no! I would not have the authority. That is a wild plan. That sounds American. We could never do that sort of thing here in Calcutta." Incredulity and alarm showed in Kahn's face.

"Okay, okay. Skip it. Maybe it wouldn't have worked."

Soon the talk shifted to other matters, and as soon as they finished their meal they left the table as others were waiting. As Kahn walked back to his office the last words Gregory had spoken kept repeating in his mind, "I've got two more weeks to waste, and I am not going to get on that boat without knowing the answer to this." Kahn shook his head sadly at the insatiable curiosity of his American friend.

Gregory went back and sat in the lobby of the Great Eastern Hotel. As he listlessly watched the colorful crowd moving through the ornate corridor his mind was busy with the problem of the notched ears. He called on all of his experience in the East to help his thinking, but to no advantage. Two weeks to spend. Two weeks to sit in the heat of Calcutta, city of strong stench and rotting beggars, city of violence, city of overhead fans, fried prawns and gin gimlets. Gregory Hewson was a man whose mind ranged like a hungry beast, searching for problems and leaping on them to suck dry the mystery. He depended on problems and complications to keep his mind alive, for he was a man who could sink into an apathy of boredom that was bottomless. He imagined hell to be a place where all of the problems were already solved.

As he sat his hand crept up and he began to finger the tip of his left ear. He realized that the idea he was getting was foolish, but he couldn't resist it. Then he pulled out a notebook and began to hunt for the address of a British doctor he had met up in Simla.

Three hours later Gregory was again seated in the lobby with a small white bandage on the up-

per half of his left ear. His tension was gone. He sat completely relaxed, and ordered a gin and water from one of the turbaned waiters who roved the lobby. Gregory decided to spent the next five or six days in relaxation and the pursuit of coolness and comfort. By then his ear would be healed sufficiently to take off the bandage. He sipped his drink and smiled as he remembered the expression on the face of his doctor friend as he had outlined his request.

Six days later Gregory removed the bandage and inspected his ear in the mirror in his bathroom at the hotel. Only a pinkness around the notch showed that it was recent. But the pinkness was only noticeable under close inspection. Then he sat down and scribbled a note to A. Kahn Haidari and placed it on his bedside cabinet where it would be found if he didn't return. He hoped that the notch was the right size and shape, but Kahn's description had been very specific, so it didn't worry him. He then dug out his most comfortable shoes and put them on. His last preparation was to strap on a snub nose thirty-two caliber revolver in a spring clip shoulder holster. The weapon was so small that no bulge was noticeable under his loose-fitting seersucker suit coat. Throughout all of this preparation he wore the satisfied expression of an ardent bridge fan laying out a problem hand to be solved.

Gregory never tired of walking the streets of Calcutta. Here were millions of people who lived so close to the edge of starvation that any scarcity of the basic foodstuffs or change in the prices could cause mass deaths. Here was teeming fertility that contributed to India's population increase of nine million persons each year. The great famine of forty-three had killed four million persons, most of them in Bengal Province. Gregory smiled a bitter smile as he remembered the newspaper editorial he had read which stated that the great famine had been a failure as it had only killed four million, thus leaving a net increase of five million in population for that year. Five million more to be so poorly fed, poorly housed and poorly educated that by comparison the most poverty ridden hamlets in the states are miracles of plenty.

He watched the naked children begging, the expensive saris of the women, the lumbering ox carts, the bicycle rickshaws, the dilapidated taxis and all the thronging color of the second largest city in the British Empire.

But always he directed his footsteps toward the meaner sections of the city. Around him the scenes of poverty and degradation grew worse as he walked further from the hotel section. As dusk approached he noticed a nearly naked man lying in the

gutter. He could have been drunk or drugged or sick or dead. The people who walked past him did not even glance at him. If he was still there at dawn one of the city disposal trucks would investigate.

As it grew dark Gregory checked off the day as a failure. He was certain that no one would notice the tiny notch at night. Since he didn't want to become a victim of bandits, he hailed a rickshaw to take him back the long miles to his hotel. As he sat in the vehicle listening to the pad pad of the naked feet of the rickshaw coolie on the quiet pavement he began to mentally lay out his route for the next day. He noticed the sound of another pair of coolie's feet coming along the road behind him at a faster pace. He saw the second coolie then, out of the corner of his eye, jogging along even with him and then slowly pulling ahead. As he started to turn in idle curiosity and look at the passenger in the second rickshaw the entire world exploded. His last conscious impression was of a blinding flash and pain in the back of his head, and the feeling of falling forward into soft, complete blackness.

Consciousness returned slowly to Gregory. His splitting head and feeling of nausea seemed strangely familiar. He opened his eyes and saw nothing. He thought at first that it was night, then as he stared into the darkness and saw no single glimmer of light, a sudden overpowering fear of blindness shook him. The fear speeded up his return to complete awareness of his surroundings. His cheek was pressed against a cool damp surface. The air smelled like a cellar, and he assumed that he was lying face down on dirt. He could move his legs freely, but his arms were lashed together in front of him. They were cramped and numb. He rolled over on his back and felt the tingle of circulation returning to his arms. Then he noticed that he was wearing only what felt to be his underwear shorts and his shoes and socks. He tried to stretch his numb arms and stopped as he felt sharp pain in his upper arms. He reached down with his chin and pulled his arms up to one side. His heart leaped as he felt the adhesive of a bandage under his chin.

Then it hadn't been bandits that knocked him out in the rickshaw. But why were only the arms cut? Why not the legs? Why was he bandaged? Why had he not been left in the street? Then he suddenly realized why the nausea seemed familiar. It was the same feeling that he had had after an operation. He had been anaesthetized. But the fear about his eyes worried him more than his immediate personal danger.

He climbed cautiously to his feet with much difficulty and tried to stand erect. When he was still

in a very stooped position, his head hit a rough ceiling. With his bound hands outstretched in front of him he felt his way around and discovered that he was in a cell about eight feet long and five feet wide with a ceiling only about five feet high. He found no windows. So his fear for his eyes began to disappear. To make certain, he backed to the wall, bent his head down and hacked at the masonry wall with his heel until the metal reinforcement on his heel struck a very visible and very satisfying spark.

It took him a long time to find the entrance to his cell. He finally felt it over in a corner, a wooden door which set flush with the masonry and was only two feet square. He knelt and pressed his nose to the crack between the door and the masonry. He could feel a faint stir of air on his lips, and that reassured him because the air was so foul in the cell that he felt weak and was forced to breathe rapidly. Having learned all that he could from his surroundings, he sat on the floor and leaned against the wall beside the door. He gave up trying to loosen his wrists after a very few tries.

Several times he slept. He had no idea of how much time passed. He utilized his waking hours in trying to make some sense out of his confinement. But all he could develop were theories. He had insufficient facts for his scientific mind to grasp and produce a positive answer. It made no sense.

He was asleep when the low door swung open. It made a gratign noise that awakened him instantly. A flickering light shone through the door.

"Crawl out, Sahib." The words sounded as though his jailor had little English. Gregory had great difficulty crawling with his hands lashed together. But he managed to wriggle through the doorway. He rose to his feet and saw, facing him, an Indian of the lowest caste. He had black hair growing from under the knot of soiled rags on his head. His eyes glinted in the light of a small dish of oil in which a lighted wick was floating. He held the lamp in his left hand and a short heavy club in his right. He pointed the club out to one side, and said, "Go!" Gregory looked and saw a long black corridor. The flickering light did not throw enough of a beam to show the far end of the corridor. Gregory walked slowly and apprehensively into the gloom, the Indian close on his heels. After about twenty feet he came to a narrow stairway leading up. He looked inquiringly back over his shoulder, but the Indian merely jabbed him with the club. He climbed up a flight, and heard the roar of street noises. He paused, was jabbed again, and continued up the second flight. It ended abruptly at a closed door. He stopped and the Indian reached around him and tapped

on the door lightly with the club.

A loud call of "Idar ao!" came from beyond the door. A sudden wave of weakness swept over Gregory, and for a second he thought he would faint. The Indian shoved the door open.

For a moment Gregory thought he was in delirium. The door opened into a luxurious modern office with discreet indirect lighting reflecting soft beams from the highly polished desk and comfortable chairs. The rugs were a thick softness from paneled wall to paneled wall. To his right was what appeared to be the main door. The desk was directly in front of him. But as soon as his eyes were adjusted to the light and he obtained his first distinct impression of the man behind the desk, all details of the office faded from his conscious mind.

An Indian of the upper classes sat behind the desk, smiling with disdain at the naked dirty figure of his unwilling guest. He wore a jeweled turban in a dusty pink shade which set off the coffee cream color of his face. It was there that his resemblance to high caste Indians stopped. Instead of the delicate facial bone structure so common among his class, this Indian had a heavy protruding jaw, thick solid looking cheek bones and a massive ridge of bone across his brows. His arms, folded on the desk top, looked unnaturally long and heavy.

After leaving Gregory standing uncomfortably for many long seconds, the man spoke in a gentle voice with a distinct Oxford inflection, "Won't you please sit down, Dr. Hewson. Over here, please, opposite me. That is excellent. Now we will have a nice talk." He reached in the drawer of the desk, drew out Gregory's revolver and laid it on the desk top, and motioned to the guard to leave.

As soon as the guard closed the door gently behind himself, Gregory cleared his throat and said, "You must excuse me if I seem speechless. The guest room you gave me and now all this . . ." He gestured at the room with his bound hands. "It has me puzzled."

"And you, Dr. Hewson, have us puzzled. You have injected into a very simple and effective plan an element of doubt. My people are worried. So it becomes necessary to find out what your plans are, and who devised this foolish trick to confuse us. Your papers indicate that you are an American, about to return to your own country." The man's tone was pleasant, and in spite of himself, Gregory found it hard to keep from relaxing in the comfort of the chair. But he knew that he would have to keep thinking and planning in order to continue to live. There was an undercurrent of menace in the office of his host.

"Correct. I am about to return

to my own country, and I fail to understand why I have become so important to you. I have no idea what you're talking about. All I want to do is to get out of here."

"I am speaking, Dr. Hewson, of your notched ear. It has caused us much trouble. We have discovered that you are not one of those we seek. Therefore the notched ear must be a trick. Once we have discovered, either in pleasant conversation or in a manner more harsh, what induced you to attempt this trick, you will most certainly not return to your country. You will take a quiet trip down the Hoogly River, without benefit of boat. Of that I can assure you."

Gregory forced his expression into a picture of bewilderment. "My ear? The notch in it? I got that at a very rough party."

"Nonsense, my good fellow. That ear has been examined by a very good surgeon while you were—ah—sleeping, shall we say? He tells me that it is a surgical matter, that notch. That it was done very recently. It was no accident. We have looked into that."

"I can tell you nothing." Gregory looked down at the clean bandages on his own upper arms. For long minutes there was silence in the office.

"Let me present your predicament to you in this fashion, Dr. Hewson. You are going to die. No matter what you tell me, you will die. It is ordained. Your only chance of finding out why you are here is to speak frankly to me. Then at least you can die without bewilderment and confusion. I will tell you anything you wish to know. That is the one small favor I can perform for you. Come now. We will exchange our thoughts on this matter."

Gregory moistened his dry lips. He was frightened. He could think of no way out of his dilemma. Obviously, the fact that he was an American citizen made no difference to the intelligent, persuasive man behind the desk. He could not feel that the threats were bluff. He knew in his innermost mind that he was to die. So he decided to find out as much as he could about the last problem that he would ever have an opportunity to solve.

"You win, then. No one is in on this foolish plan of mine except myself. A man on the Calcutta Police told me of the problem of the mutilations. I thought I could find out something this way. I went too far. I have certain ideas regarding the plan. That is all. I had this notch made in order to be able to dig deeper into the mystery by making a decoy of myself. May I tell you what I have guessed?"

"Most certainly. And I shall correct your guesses. It is my honor to satisfy the curiosity of a man of science such as yourself."

"Okay, then. My first impression of these mutilations was wrong. I thought in terms of revenge for something these people had done. Then it occurred to me that the pattern of the mutilations indicated that someone was trying to find something hidden in the limbs, in the tissues of these unfortunate people. Is that right?"

"That is correct. You are a man of intelligence. I knew it."

"Then why the notched ear? It must be because the person in whose tissues these mysterious small articles would be hidden would be unconscious of the fact that they were carrying these articles around. The fact that the ear was slashed to remove the notch would indicate that whoever was doing the collecting wished to avoid the chance of searching in the limbs of the same person twice. I could not figure out why the carrier of the articles was not entirely destroyed after the collection by you, or your organization."

"I am afraid that was a foolish bit of bravado on my part. I had a childish urge to baffle the local police. A form of egotism, I imagine."

"I could not imagine a search for notched ears in all of India, so I made the assumption that only those persons who would be likely to return to Calcutta were disfigured."

"Correct."

"But what could be hidden in the tissues of persons in a Japanese internment camp which would be collected in Calcutta? What could be the relationship? The only relationship I could imagine was between the Japanese, and their agents in India. But that seemed like a most peculiar arrangement—too unwieldy and full of danger. Then it occurred to me that there was a large group of Indians in Japanese service in Burma—Bose's Army . . . the Indian Army of Independence. That made more sense to me. So I imagined a situation where a few of the more important men in Bose's outfit, say his lieutenants, got together and figured that Japan was on the downgrade. They went to the Japanese and threatened to withdraw their support. The Japanese were worried because they needed the additional Indian troops in the defense of the Arakan sector. So they offered additional riches to these lieutenants."

"That is an almost exact description of what happened. We felt that the money they offered might mean nothing. If it were to be paid us, it might be removed when and if defeat came, and we would be penniless. We wanted them to send it back to India, where it would be waiting for those of us who returned if the war were lost. But there was no one here we could trust. The situation was deadlocked for

about a month, when an obscure officer of the Japanese devised the scheme of turning some of the prisoners into walking banks, for us to collect the funds from when we returned. It sounded most foolish at the time, but it worked. None of them suspected why they were being so mistreated, and then suddenly treated with consideration."

"Then any small objects of great value could have been used?"

"Correct again. In the flesh of both the right and left arm and leg we could conceal up to a half pound of gems, drugs, platinum. I am one of the two who returned with the details of the plan. I am quickly becoming a wealthy man. The other man who knew the plan died suddenly some weeks ago. Very sad. Those articles which might have set up a bad reaction with the flesh of our walking bank vaults were contained in plastic capsules which resist corrosion. The incisions to bury them were most skillfully made, and of course, the prisoners had so many other wounds that they detected no particular pattern on their own bodies. The items were buried at a sufficient depth that lumps could not be felt."

"I have never heard of a stranger plan. It's fantastic."

"I'm afraid, my dear doctor, that you won't have the chance to try to make anyone believe you. It is time for you to prepare your thoughts for a short trip to the river. Let me see, you have about two hours. Believe me when I say that I am truly grieved that you must die. You are a brilliant man."

"There is one small grain of cheer in my dying, however. You will soon join me."

"What! You are speaking nonsense."

"I assure you as a man of science that I am speaking nothing but the truth."

"I fail to understand."

"I can best explain it this way, by asking you a question. What do people whom you have not seen for two years say to you when you meet again?"

The Indian's face showed surprise. "Why, they act strange. They find it hard to recognize me. They say I have changed a great deal."

"Precisely. In the last two years your jaw has grown longer and heavier. Your head has grown in size. Your neck has thickened. In fact all of the bones of your head and shoulders have grown thicker and heavier. They are growing each day."

"But I have seen doctors about this. It has bothered me. But I am told not to worry. It is nothing."

"Will it be nothing as your bones steadily thicken? Nothing as your brain is slowly crushed by the expanding bone? As you go insane? As you die in ghastly

pain?" Gregory leaned forward.

"You are trying to frighten me! It is not so!"

"Look in your mirror. It is a disease of the glands called acromegaly. I noticed as soon as I saw you that you have an acute form of it. I have worked with it in the states. It is only recently that a cure has been devised."

"Tell me the cure!"

"And die myself? Don't be silly."

"What do you want? Are you trying to trick me?" Stark fear showed in the man's eyes. He clutched the edge of the desk with his huge hands.

"I am not trying to trick you, and I can promise you one thing. That all of the tortures you could devise will not drag from me one word regarding the cure. I have had experience with pain, and I know that I can resist."

The Indian looked across into Gregory's level grey eyes and knew that he was hearing the truth. This determined American would die without giving up a scrap of information that would lead to a cure.

"I will let you die anyway."

"That's okay with me, Bud. I will die easier than you will. The sufferings of victims of your disease are horrible to watch. You come out on the dirty end of this deal. The riches you are digging out of these poor joes won't do you any good."

"I will visit your country."

"You won't have time. Besides, it's still only experimental. Only I could get you the cure in time to save you."

There was silence in the office. The Indian drummed nervously on the desk. Then he got up and went over to a mirror. He looked intently into it, rubbing his big hand along the heavy jaw bone. Then he turned back and faced Gregory, desperation in his eyes.

"What are your terms?"

"Come with me to the Calcutta police station."

"No."

"Okay, it's your funeral."

Ten minutes later pedestrians on Chowringhi Road blinked and stood with their mouths open as a well dressed Indian and a frowzy looking white man wearing only shorts and shoes came hurrying out of an ornate door onto the sidewalk. Gregory could hardly see after the dim lights of the office. He was astonished in that he had unconsciously believed that it was night. The glare of the sun was powerful. They climbed into a bright green taxi, a touring car with two turbaned Sikhs in the front seat. Ten minutes later they entered the main police station.

A. Kahn Haidâri did not close his gaping mouth until Gregory had finished his long story. He kept looking first at Gregory and then at the stranger with such a vacant expression that a burble of laughter lay just behind each

of Gregory's words. At last he finished, and the three sat in silence.

"But Gregory, my friend, how will I explain to the . . . " His voice trailed off in disconsolate confusion. The stranger had been fidgeting throughout the recital. Now he spoke eagerly to Gregory.

"The cure! About the cure! You will fix it with the police so that I can be treated? Soon?"

Gregory smiled slowly and lazily. "Look, old man. You don't need any cure. Sure you've got acromegaly, but it's only a chronic disease. It stops after a while and just leaves you with an oversize head, hands and feet. In fact, in my country there is a wrestler they call the Angel who has made a fortune out of the weird look he got from having acromegaly. You can relax."

The dark eyes blazed. "You tricked me! You gave me your word!"

"If you mean that it wasn't sporting, not cricket, not befitting a wearer of the old school tie, you're quite right, old boy. You can spend your time in the jolly old jail remembering that I am just a crude American who dosen't understand the niceties of civilized behavior."

ATOMIC LOVE

(*continued from page 7*)

"You're positively atomic with a tennis racket. I wish I had a serve like yours."

"I-I," Pat stuttered.

"How about a game with me tomorrow?" he went on.

"With you? Oh, sure." Pat's tongue seemed hard to manage.

"Pat said she was quitting tennis," Tom butted in.

"I'm not either." Pat gave her brother an icy stare.

"And say," Dean continued, "I heard you say something about going to a party with Tom. Why don't you go with me? Harriet's got a droopy sack named Loid lined up for me. But I want somebody I can talk tennis with. And, say, do you ever go fishing?"

"Oh, yes," was all that Pat could manage to call down to him from the cloud she was floating on.

THE BIRTHMARK

By NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

The mark on his wife's cheek became an obsession. If necessary he would employ devil's magic to erase it

LATE in the eighteenth century there lived a man of science, an eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy, who not long before our story opens had made experience of a spiritual affinity more attractive than any chemical one. He had left his laboratory to the care of an assistant, cleared his fine countenance from the furnace-smoke, washed the stain of acids from his fingers, and persuaded a beautiful woman to become his wife. In those days, when the comparatively recent discovery of electricity and other kindred mysteries of Nature seemed to open paths into the region of miracle, it was not unusual for the love of science to rival the love of woman in its depths and absorbing energy. The higher intellect, the imagination, the spirit, and even the heart might all find their congenial ailment in pursuits which, as some of their ardent votaries believed, would ascend from one step of powerful intelligence to another, until the philosopher should lay his hand on the secret of creative force and perhaps make new worlds for himself. We know not whether Aylmer possessed this degree of faith in man's ultimate control over nature. He had devoted himself, however, too unreservedly to scientific studies ever to be weakened from them by any second

passion. His love for his young wife might prove the stronger of the two; but it could only be by intertwining itself with his love of science and uniting the strength of the latter to his own.

Such a union accordingly took place, and was attended with truly remarkable consequences and a deeply impressive moral. One day, very soon after their marriage, Aylmer sat gazing at his wife with a trouble in his countenance that grew stronger until he spoke.

"Georgiana," said he, "has it never occurred to you that the mark upon your cheek might be removed?"

"No, indeed," said she, smiling; but, perceiving the seriousness of his manner, she blushed deeply. "To tell you the truth, it has been so often called a charm, that I was simple enough to imagine it might be so."

"Ah, upon another face perhaps it might," replied her husband; "but never on yours. No, dearest Georgiana, you came so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature, that this slightest possible defect, which we hesitate whether to term a defect or a beauty, shocks me, as being the visible mark of earthly imperfection."

"Shocks you, my husband!" cried Georgiana, deeply hurt; at first reddening with momentary anger, but then bursting into tears. "Then why did you take me from my mother's side? You cannot love what shocks you!"

To explain this conversation, it must be mentioned that in the centre of Georgiana's left cheek there was a singular mark, deeply interwoven, as it were, with the texture and substance of her face. In the usual state of her complexion—a healthy though delicate bloom—the mark wore a tint of deeper crimson, which imperfectly defined its shape amid the surrounding rosiness. When she blushed it gradually became more indistinct, and finally vanished amid the triumphant rush of blood that bathed the whole cheek with its brilliant glow. But if any shifting motion caused her to turn pale there was the mark again, a crimson stain upon the snow, in what Aylmer sometimes deemed an almost fearful distinctness. Its shape bore not a little similarity to the human hand, though of the smallest pigmy size. Georgiana's lovers were wonted to say that some fairy at her birth-hour had laid her tiny hand upon the infant's cheek, and left this impress there in token of the magic endowments that were to give her such sway over all hearts. Many a desperate swain would have risked life for the privilege of pressing his lips to the mysterious hand. It must not be concealed, however, that the impression wrought by this fairy sign-manual varied exceedingly according to the difference of temperament in the beholders. Some fastidious

persons—but they were exclusively of her own sex—affirmed that the bloody hand, as they chose to call it, quite destroyed the effect of Georgiana's beauty and rendered her countenance even hideous. But it would be as reasonable to say that one of those small blue stains which sometimes occur in the purest statuary marble would convert the Eve of Powers to a monster. Masculine observers, if the birthmark did not heighten their admiration, contented themselves with wishing it away, that the world might possess one living specimen of ideal loveliness without the semblance of a flaw. After his marriage—for he thought little or nothing of the matter before—Aylmer discovered that this was the case with himself.

Had she been less beautiful—if Envy's self could have found aught else to sneer at—he might have felt his affection heightened by the prettiness of this mimic hand, now vaguely portrayed, now lost, now stealing forth again and glimmering to and fro with every pulse of emotion that throbbed within her heart; but, seeing her otherwise so perfect, he found this one defect grow more and more intolerable with every moment of their united lives. It was the fatal flaw of humanity which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions, either to imply that they are temporary and finite, or that their perfection must be wrought by toil and pain. The crimson hand expressed the ineludible gripe in which mortality clutches the highest and purest of earthly mould, degrading them into kindred with the lowest, and even with the very brutes, like whom their visible frames return to dust. In this manner, selecting it as the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death, Aylmer's sombre imagination was not long in rendering the birthmark a frightful object, causing him more trouble and horror than ever Georgiana's beauty, whether of soul or sense, had given him delight.

At all the seasons which should have been their happiest he invariably, and without intending it, nay, in spite of a purpose to the contrary, reverted to this one disastrous topic. Trifling as it at first appeared, it so connected itself with innumerable trains of thought and modes of feeling that it became the central point of all. With the morning twilight Aylmer opened his eyes upon his wife's face and recognized the symbol of imperfection; and when they sat together at the evening hearth his eyes wandered stealthily to her cheek, and beheld, flickering with the blaze of the wood-fire, the spectral hand that wrote mortality where he would fain have worshipped. Georgiana soon learned to shudder at his gaze. It needed but a glance with the

peculiar expression that his face often wore to change the roses of her cheek into a deathlike paleness, amid which the crimson hand was brought strongly out, like a bas-relief of ruby on the whitest marble.

Late one night, when the lights were growing dim so as hardly to betray the stain on the poor wife's cheek, she herself, for the first time, voluntarily took up the subject. She spoke softly, eagerly.

"Do you remember, my dear Aylmer," said she, with a feeble attempt at a smile, "have you any recollection, of a dream last night about this odious hand?"

"None! none whatever!" replied Aylmer, starting; but then he added, in a dry, cold tone, affected for the sake of concealing the real depth of his emotion, "I might well dream of it; for, before I fell asleep, it had taken a pretty firm hold on my fancy."

"And did you dream of it?" continued Georgiana, hastily; for she dreaded lest a gush of tears should interrupt what she had to say. "A terrible dream! I wonder that you can forget it. Is it possible to forget this one expression? —'It is in her heart now; we must have it out!' Reflect, my husband; for by all means I would have you recall that dream."

The mind is in a sad state when Sleep, the all-involving, cannot confine her spectres within the dim region of her sway, but suffers them to break forth, affrighting this actual life with secrets that perchance belong to a deeper one. Aylmer now remembered his dream. He had fancied himself with his servant Aminadab attempting an operation for the removal of the birthmark; but the deeper went the knife, the deeper sank the hand, until at length its tiny grasp appeared to have caught hold of Georgiana's heart; whence, however, her husband was inexorably resolved to cut or wrench it away.

When the dream had shaped itself perfectly in his memory, Aylmer sat in his wife's presence with a guilty feeling. Truth often finds its way to the mind close-muffled in robes of sleep, and then speaks with uncompromising directness of matters in regard to which we practise an unconscious self-deception during our waking moments. Until now he had not been aware of the tyrannising influence acquired by one idea over his mind, and of the lengths which he might find in his heart to go for the sake of giving himself peace.

"Aylmer," resumed Georgiana, solemnly, "I know not what may be the cost to both of us to rid me of this fatal birthmark. Perhaps its removal may cause cureless deformity; or it may be the stain goes as deep as life itself. Again; do we know that there is a possibility, on any terms, of unclasping the firm gripe of this little hand which was laid upon me before I came into the world?"

"Dearest Georgiana, I have spent much thought upon the subject," hastily interrupted Aylmer. "I am convinced of the perfect practicability of its removal."

"If there be the remotest possibility of it," continued Georgiana, "let the attempt be made, at whatever risk. Danger is nothing to me; for life, while this hateful mark makes me the object of your horror and disgust—life is a burden which I would fling down with joy. Either remove this dreadful hand, or take my wretched life! You have deep science. All the world bears witness to it. You have achieved great wonders. Cannot you remove this little, little mark, which I cover with the tips of two small fingers? Is this beyond your power, for the sake of your own peace, and to save your poor wife from madness?"

"Noblest, dearest, tenderest wife," cried Aylmer, rapturously, "doubt not my power. I have already given this matter the deepest thought — thought which might almost have enlightened me to create a being less perfect than yourself. Georgiana, you have led me deeper than ever into the heart of science. I feel myself fully competent to render this dear cheek as faultless as its fellow; and then, most beloved, what will be my triumph when I shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work! Even Pygmalion, when his sculptured woman assumed life, felt not greater ecstasy than mine will be."

"It is resolved, then," said Georgiana, faintly smiling. "And, Aylmer, spare me not, though you should find the birthmark take refuge in my heart at last."

Her husband tenderly kissed her cheek—her right cheek—not that which bore the impress of the crimson hand.

The next day Aylmer apprised his wife of a plan that he had formed whereby he might have opportunity for the intense thought and constant watchfulness which the proposed operation would require; while Georgiana, likewise, would enjoy the perfect repose essential to its success. They were to seclude themselves in the extensive apartments occupied by Aylmer as a laboratory, and where, during his toilsome youth, he had made discoveries in the elemental powers of nature that had roused the admiration of all the learned societies in Europe. Seated calmly in this laboratory, the pale philosopher had investigated the secrets of the highest cloud-region and of the profoundest mines; he had satised himself of the causes that kindled and kept alive the fires of the volcano; and had explained the mystery of fountains, and how it is that they gush forth, some so bright and pure, and others with such rich medicinal virtues, from the dark bosom of the earth.

Here, too, at an earlier period, he had studied the wonders of the human frame, and attempted to fathom the very process by which Nature assimilates all her precious influences from earth and air, and from the spiritual world, to create and foster man, her masterpiece. The latter pursuit, however, Aylmer had long laid aside in unwilling recognition of the truth—against which all seekers sooner or later stumble—that our great creative Mother — while she amuses us with apparently working in the broadest sunshine, is yet severely careful to keep her own secrets, and, in spite of her pretended openness, shows us nothing but results. She permits us, indeed, to mar, but seldom to mend, and, like a jealous patentee, on no account to make. Now, however, Aylmer resumed these half-forgotten investigations; not, of course, with such hopes or wishes as first suggested them, but because they involved much physiological truth and lay in the path of his proposed scheme for the treatment of Georgiana.

As he led her over the threshold of the laboratory Georgiana was cold and tremulous. Aylmer looked cheerfully into her face, with intent to reassure her, but was so startled with the intense glow of the birthmark upon the whiteness of her cheek that he could not restrain a strong convulsive shudder. His wife fainted.

"Aminadab! A m i n a d a b !" shouted Aylmer, stamping violently on the floor.

Forthwith there issued from an inner apartment a man of low stature, but bulky frame, with shaggy hair hanging about his visage, which was grimed with the vapours of the furnace. This personage had been Aylmer's underworker during his whole scientific career, and was admirably fitted for that office by his great mechanical readiness, and the skill with which, while incapable of comprehending a single principle, he executed all the details of his master's experiments. With his vast strength, his shaggy hair, his smoky aspect, and the indescribable earthiness that encrusted him, he seemed to represent man's physical nature; while Aylmer's slender figure, and pale, intellectual face, were no less apt a type of the spiritual element.

"Throw open the door of the boudoir, Aminadab," said Aylmer, "and burn a pastil."

"Yes, master," answered Aminadab, looking intently at the lifeless form of Georgiana; and then he muttered to himself: "If she were my wife, I'd never part with that birthmark."

When Georgiana recovered consciousness she found herself breathing an atmosphere of penetrating fragrance, the gentle potency of which had recalled her from her deathlike faintness. The scene around her looked like enchantment. Aylmer had convert-

ed those smoky, dingy, sombre rooms, where he had spent his brightest years in recondite pursuits, into a series of beautiful apartments not unfit to be the secluded abode of a lovely woman. The walls were hung with gorgeous curtains, which imparted the combination of grandeur and grace that no other species of adornment can achieve; and, as they fell from the ceiling to the floor, their rich and ponderous folds, concealing all angles and straight lines, appeared to shut in the scene from infinite space. For aught Georgiana knew, it might be a pavilion among the clouds. And Aylmer, excluding the sunshine, which would have interfered with his chemical processes, had supplied its place with perfumed lamps, emitting flames of various hue, but all uniting in a soft, empurpled radiance. He now knelt by his wife's side, watching her earnestly, but without alarm; for he was confident in his science, and felt that he could draw a magic circle round her within which no evil might intrude.

"Where am I? Ah, I remember," said Georgiana, faintly; and she placed her hand over her cheek to hide the terrible mark from her husband's eyes.

"Fear not, dearest!" exclaimed he. "Do not shrink from me! Believe me, Georgiana, I even rejoice in this single imperfection, since it will be such a rapture to remove it from your lovely face."

"O spare me!" sadly replied his wife. "Pray do not look at it again. I never can forget that convulsive shudder."

In order to soothe Georgiana, and, as it were, to release her mind from the burden of actual things, Aylmer now put in practice some of the light and playful secrets which science had taught him among its profounder lore. Air figures, absolutely bodiless ideas, and forms of unsubstantial beauty came and danced before her, imprinting their momentary footsteps on beams of light. Though she had some indistinct idea of the method of these optical phenomena, still the illusion was almost perfect enough to warrant the belief that her husband possessed sway over the spiritual world. Then again, when she felt a wish to look forth from her seclusion, immediately, as if her thoughts were answered, the procession of external existence flitted across a screen. The scenery and the figures of actual life were perfectly represented but with that bewitching yet indescribable difference which always makes a picture, an image, or a shadow so much more attractive than the original. When wearied of this, Aylmer bade her cast her eyes upon a vessel containing a quantity of earth. She did so, with little interest at first; but was soon startled to perceive the germ of a plant shooting upward from the

soil. Then came the slender stalk; the leaves gradually unfolded themselves; and amid them was a perfect and lovely flower.

"It is magical!" cried Georgiana. "I dare not touch it."

"Nay, pluck it," answered Aylmer—"pluck it, and inhale its brief perfume while you may. The flower will wither in a few moments and leave nothing save its brown seed-vessels; but thence may be perpetuated a race as ephemeral as itself."

But Georgiana had no sooner touched the flower than the whole plant suffered a blight, its leaves turning coal-black as if by the agency of fire.

"There was too powerful a stimulus," said Aylmer, thoughtfully.

To make up for this abortive experiment, he proposed to take her portrait by a scientific process of his own invention. It was to be effected by rays of light striking upon a polished plate of metal. Georgiana assented; but, on looking at the result, was affrighted to find the features of the portrait blurred and indefinable; while the minute figure of a hand appeared where the cheek should have been. Aylmer snatched the metallic plate and threw it into a jar of corrosive acid.

Soon, however, he forgot these mortifying failures. In the intervals of study and chemical experiment he came to her flushed and exhausted, but seemed invigorated by her presence, and spoke in glowing language of the resources of his art. He gave a history of the long dynasty of the alchemists, who spent so many ages in quest of the universal solvent by which the golden principle might be elicited from all things vile and base. Aylmer appeared to believe that, by the plainest scientific logic, it was altogether within the limits of possibility to discover this long-sought medium. "But," he added, "a philosopher who should go deep enough to acquire the power would attain too lofty a wisdom to stoop to the exercise of it." Not less singular were his opinions in regard to the elixir vitae. He more than intimated that it was at his option to concoct a liquid that should prolong life for years, perhaps interminably; but that it would produce a discord in nature which all the world, and chiefly the quaffer of the immortal nostrum, would find cause to curse.

"Aylmer, are you in earnest?" asked Georgiana, looking at him with amazement and fear. "It is terrible to possess such power, or even to dream of possessing it."

"O, do not tremble, my love," said her husband. "I would not wrong either you or myself by working such inharmonious effects upon our lives; but I would have you consider how trifling, in comparison, is the skill requisite to remove this little hand."

At the mention of the birthmark, Georgiana, as usual, shrank as if a red-hot iron had touched her cheek.

Again Aylmer applied himself to his labours. She could hear his voice in the distant furnace-room giving directions to Aminadab, whose harsh, uncouth, misshapen tones were audible in response, more like the grunt or growl of a brute than human speech. After hours of absence, Aylmer reappeared and proposed that she should now examine his cabinet of chemical products and natural treasures of the earth. Among the former he showed her a small vial, in which, he remarked, was contained a gentle yet most powerful fragrance, capable of impregnating all the breezes that blow across a kingdom. They were of inestimable value, the contents of that little vial; and, as he said so, he threw some of the perfume into the air and filled the room with piercing and invigorating delight.

"And what is this?" asked Georgiana, pointing to a small crystal globe containing a gold-coloured liquid. "It is so beautiful to the eye that I could imagine it the elixir of life."

"In one sense it is," replied Aylmer; "or rather, the elixir of immortality. It is the most precious poison that ever was concocted in this world. By its aid I could apportion the lifetime of any mortal at whom you might point your finger. The strength of the dose would determine whether he were to linger out years, or drop dead in the midst of a breath. No king on his guarded throne could keep his life if I, in my private station, should deem that the welfare of millions justified me in depriving him of it."

"Why do you keep such a terrific drug?" inquired Georgiana, staring in horror at the liquid.

"Do not mistrust me, dearest," said her husband, smiling; "its virtuous potency is yet greater than its harmful one. But see! here is a powerful cosmetic. With a few drops of this in a vase of water, freckles may be washed away as easily as the hands are cleansed. A stronger infusion would take the blood out of the cheek, and leave the rosiest beauty a pale ghost."

"Is it with this lotion that you intend to bathe my cheek?" asked Georgiana, anxiously.

"O, no," hastily replied her husband; "this is merely superficial. Your case demands a remedy that shall go deeper."

In his interviews with Georgiana, Aylmer generally made minute inquiries as to her sensations, and whether the confinement of the rooms and the temperature of the atmosphere agreed with her. These questions had such a particular drift that Georgiana began to conjecture that she was already subjected to cer-

tain physical influences, either breathed in with the fragrant air or taken with her food. She fancied likewise, but it might be altogether fancy, that there was a stirring up of her system — a strange, indefinite sensation creeping through her veins, and tingling, half painfully, half pleasurably, at her heart. Still, whenever she dared to look into the mirror, there she beheld herself pale as a white rose and with the crimson birthmark stamped upon her cheek. Not even Aylmer now hated it so much as she.

To dispel the tedium of the hours which her husband found it necessary to devote to the processes of combination and analysis, Georgiana turned over the volumes of his scientific library. In many dark old tomes she met with chapters full of romance and poetry. They were the works of the philosophers of the Middle Ages, such as Albertus Magnus, Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, and the famous friar who created the prophetic Brazen Head. All these antique naturalists stood in advance of their centuries, yet were imbued with some of their credulity, and therefore were believed, and perhaps imagined themselves to have acquired from the investigation of nature a power above nature, and from physics a sway over the spiritual world. Hardly less curious and imaginative were the early volumes of the Transactions of the Royal Society, in which the members, knowing little of the limits of natural possibility, were continually recording wonders or proposing methods whereby wonders might be wrought.

But, to Georgiana, the most engrossing volume was a large folio from her husband's own hand, in which he had recorded every experiment of his scientific career, its original aim, the methods adopted for its development, and its final success or failure, with the circumstances to which either event was attributable. The book, in truth, was both the history and emblem of his ardent, ambitious, imaginative, yet practical and laborious life. He handled physical details as if there were nothing beyond them; yet spiritualised them all, and redeemed himself from materialism by his strong and eager aspiration towards the infinite. In his grasp the veriest clod of earth assumed a soul. Georgiana, as she read, reverenced Aylmer and loved him more profoundly than ever, but with a less entire dependence on his judgment than heretofore. Much as he had accomplished, she could not but observe that his most splendid successes were almost invariably failures, if compared with the ideal at which he aimed. His brightest diamonds were the merest pebbles, and felt to be so by himself, in comparison with the inestimable gems which lay hidden beyond his reach. The

volume, rich with achievements that had won renown for its author, was yet as melancholy a record as ever mortal hand had penned. It was the sad confession and continual exemplification of the shortcomings of the composite man, the spirit burdened with clay and working in matter, and of the despair that assails the higher nature at finding itself so miserably thwarted by the earthly part. Perhaps every man of genius, in whatever sphere, might recognise the image of his own experience in Aylmer's journal.

So deeply did these reflections affect Georgiana that she laid her face upon the open volume and burst into tears. In this situation she was found by her husband.

"It is dangerous to read in a sorcerer's books," said he with a smile, though his countenance was uneasy and displeased. "Georgiana, there are pages in that volume which I can scarcely glance over and keep my senses. Take heed lest it prove as detrimental to you."

"It has made me worship you more than ever," said she.

"Ah, wait for this one success," rejoined he, "then worship me if you will. I shall deem myself hardly unworthy of it. But come, I have sought you for the luxury of your voice. Sing to me, dearest."

So she poured out the liquid music of her voice to quench the thirst of his spirit. He then took his leave with a boyish exuberance of gaiety, assuring her that her seclusion would endure but a little longer, and that the result was already certain. Scarcely had he departed when Georgiana felt irresistibly impelled to follow him. She had forgotten to inform Aylmer of a symptom which for two or three hours past had begun to excite her attention. It was a sensation in the fatal birthmark, not painful, but which induced a restlessness throughout her system. Hastening after her husband, she intruded for the first time into the laboratory.

The first thing that struck her eye was the furnace, that hot and feverish worker, with the intense glow of its fire, which by the quantities of soot clustered above it seemed to have been burning for ages. There was a distilling-apparatus in full operation. Around the room were retorts, tubes, cylinders, crucibles, and other apparatus of chemical research. An electrical machine stood ready for immediate use. The atmosphere felt oppressiveiy close, and was tainted with gaseous odours which had been tormented forth by the processes of science. The severe and homely simplicity of the apartment, with its naked walls and brick pavement, looked strange, accustomed as Georgiana had become to the fantastic elegance of her boudoir.

But what chiefly, indeed almost solely, drew her attention was the aspect of Aylmer himself.

He was pale as death, anxious and absorbed, and hung over the furnace as if it depended upon his utmost watchfulness whether the liquid which it was distilling should be the draught of immortal happiness or misery. How different from the sanguine and joyous mien that he had assumed for Georgiana's encouragement!

"Carefully now, Aminadab! carefully, thou human machine; carefully, thou man of clay," muttered Aylmer, more to himself than his assistant. "Now, if there be a thought too much or too little, it is all over."

"Ho! ho!" mumbled Aminadab. "Look, master! look!"

Aylmer raised his eyes hastily, and at first reddened, then grew paler than ever, on beholding Georgiana. He rushed towards her and seized her arm with a gripe that left the print of his fingers upon it.

"Why do you come hither? Have you no trust in your husband?" cried he, impetuously. "Would you throw the blight of that fatal birthmark over my labours? It is not well done. Go, prying woman! go!"

"Nay, Aylmer," said Georgiana, with the firmness of which she possessed no stinted endowment, "it is not you that have a right to complain. You mistrust your wife; you have concealed the anxiety with which you watch the development of this experiment. Think not so unworthily of me, my husband. Tell me all the risk we run, and fear not that I shall shrink; for my share in it is far less than your own."

"No, no, Georgiana!" said Aylmer, impatiently; "it must not be."

"I submit," replied she, calmly. "And, Aylmer, I shall quaff whatever draught you bring me; but it will be on the same principle that would induce me to take a dose of poison if offered by your hand."

"My noble wife," said Aylmer, deeply moved, "I knew not the height and depth of your nature until now. Nothing shall be concealed. Know, then, that this crimson hand, superficial as it seems, has clutched its grasp into your being with a strength of which I had no previous conception. I have already administered agents powerful enough to do aught except to change your entire physical system. Only one thing remains to be tried. If that fail us we are ruined."

"Why did you hesitate to tell me this?" asked she.

"Because, Georgiana," said Aylmer, in a low voice, "there is danger."

"Danger? There is but one danger—that this horrible stigma shall be left upon my cheek!" cried Georgiana. "Remove it, remove it, whatever be the cost, or

we shall both go raving mad!"

"Heaven knows your words are too true," said Aylmer, sadly. "And now, dearest, return to your boudoir. In a little while all will be tested."

He conducted her back and took leave of her with a solemn tenderness which spoke far more than his words how much was now at stake. After his departure Georgiana became rapt in musings. She considered the character of Aylmer, and did it completer justice than at any previous moment. Her heart exulted, while it trembled, at his honourable love—so pure and lofty that it would accept nothing less than perfection, nor miserably make itself contented with an earthlier nature than he had dreamed of. She felt how much more precious was such a sentiment than that meaner kind which would have borne with the imperfection for her sake, and have been guilty of treason to holy love by degrading its perfect idea to the level of the actual; and with her whole spirit she prayed that, for a single moment, she might satisfy his highest and deepest conception. Longer than one moment she well knew it could not be; for his spirit was ever on the march, ever ascending, and each instant required something that was beyond the scope of the instant before.

The sound of her husband's footsteps aroused her. He bore a crystal goblet containing a liquor colourless as water, but bright enough to be the draught of immortality. Aylmer was pale; but it seemed rather the consequence of a highly-wrought state of mind and tension of spirit than of fear or doubt.

"The concoction of the draught has been perfect," said he in answer to Georgiana's look. "Unless all my science have deceived me, it cannot fail."

"Save on your account, my dearest Aylmer," observed his wife, "I might wish to put off this birthmark of mortality by relinquishing mortality itself in preference to any other mode. Life is but a sad possession to those who have attained precisely the degree of moral advancement at which I stand. Were I weaker and blinder, it might be happiness. Were I stronger, it might be endured hopefully. But, being what I find myself, methinks I am of all mortals the most fit to die."

"You are fit for heaven without tasting death!" replied her husband. "But why do we speak of dying? The draught cannot fail. Behold its effect upon this plant."

On the window-seat there stood a geranium diseased with yellow blotches, which had overspread all its leaves. Aylmer poured a small quantity of the liquid upon the soil in which it grew. In a little time, when the roots of the plant had taken up the moisture, the unsightly blotches began to be extinguished in a living ver-

dure. The leaves were green again.

"There needed no proof," said Georgiana, quietly. "Give me the goblet. I joyfully stake all upon your word."

"Drink, then, thou lofty creature!" exclaimed Aylmer, with fervid admiration. "There is no taint of imperfection on thy spirit. Thy sensible frame, too, shall soon be all perfect."

She quaffed the liquid and returned the goblet to his hand.

"It is grateful," said she, with a placid smile. "Methinks it is like water from a heavenly fountain; for it contains I know not what of unobtrusive fragrance and deliciousness. It allays a feverish thirst that had parched me for many days. Now, dearest, let me sleep. My earthly senses are closing over my spirit like the leaves around the heart of a rose at sunset."

She spoke the last words with a gentle reluctance, as if it required almost more energy than she could command to pronounce the faint and lingering syllables. Scarcely had they loitered through her lips ere she was lost in slumber. Aylmer sat by her side, watching her aspect with the emotions proper to a man, the whole value of whose existence was involved in the process now to be tested. Mingled with this mood, however, was the philosophic investigation characteristic of the man of science. Not the minutest symptom escaped him. A heightened flush of the cheek, a slight irregularity of breath, a quiver of the eyelid, a hardly perceptible tremor through the frame—such were the details which, as the moments passed, he wrote down in his folio volume. Intense thought had set its stamp upon every previous page of that volume; but the thoughts of years were all concentrated upon the last.

While thus employed, he failed not to gaze often at the fatal hand, and not without a shudder. Yet once, by a strange and unaccountable impulse, he pressed it with his lips. His spirit recoiled, however, in the very act; and Georgiana, out of the midst of her deep sleep, moved uneasily and murmured, as if in remonstrance. Again Aylmer resumed his watch. Nor was it without avail. The crimson hand, which at first had been strongly visible upon the marble paleness of Georgiana's cheek, now grew more faintly outlined. She remained not less pale than ever; but the birthmark, with every breath that came and went, lost somewhat of its former distinctness. Its presence had been awful; its departure was more awful still. Watch the stain of the rainbow fading out of the sky, and you will know how that mysterious symbol passed away.

"By Heaven! it is well-nigh gone!" said Aylmer to himself, in almost irrepressible ecstasy. "I

can scarcely trace it now. Success! success! And now it is like the faintest rose-colour. The lightest flush of blood across her cheek would overcome it. But she is so pale!"

He drew aside the window-curtain and suffered the light of natural day to fall into the room and rest upon her cheek. At the same time he heard a gross, hoarse chuckle, which he had long know as his servant Aminadab's expression of delight.

"Ah, clod! ah, earthly mass!" cried Aylmer, laughing in a sort of frenzy, "you have served me well! Matter and spirit—earth and heaven—have both done their part in this! Laugh, thing of the senses! You have earned the right to laugh."

These exclamations broke Georgiana's sleep. She slowly unclosed her eyes and gazed into the mirror which her husband had aranged for that purpose. A faint smile flitted over her lips when she recognised how barely perceptible was now that crimson hand which had once blazed forth with such disastrous brilliancy as to scare away all their happiness. But then her eyes sought Aylmer's face with a trouble and anxiety that he could by no means account for.

"My poor Aylmer!" murmured she.

"Poor? Nay, richest, happiest, most favoured!" exclaimed he. "My peerless bride, it is successful! You are absolutely perfect!"

"My poor Aylmer," she repeated, with a more than human tenderness, "you have aimed loftily; you have done nobly. Do not repent that, with so high and pure a feeling, you have rejected the best the earth could offer. Aylmer, dearest Aylmer, I am dying!"

Alas! it was too true! The fatal hand had grappled with the mystery of life, and was the bond by which an angelic spirit kept itself in union with a mortal frame. As the last crimson tint of the birthmark—that sole token of human imperfection—faded from her cheek, the parting breath of the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere, and her soul, lingering a moment near her husband, took its heavenward flight. Then a hoarse, chuckling laugh was heard again! Thus ever does the gross fatality of earth exult in its invariable triumph over the immortal essence which, in this dim sphere of half-development, demands the completeness of a higher state. Yet, had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life of the self-same texture with the celestial. The momentary circumstance was too strong for him; he failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time, and, living once for all in eternity, to find the perfect future in the present.

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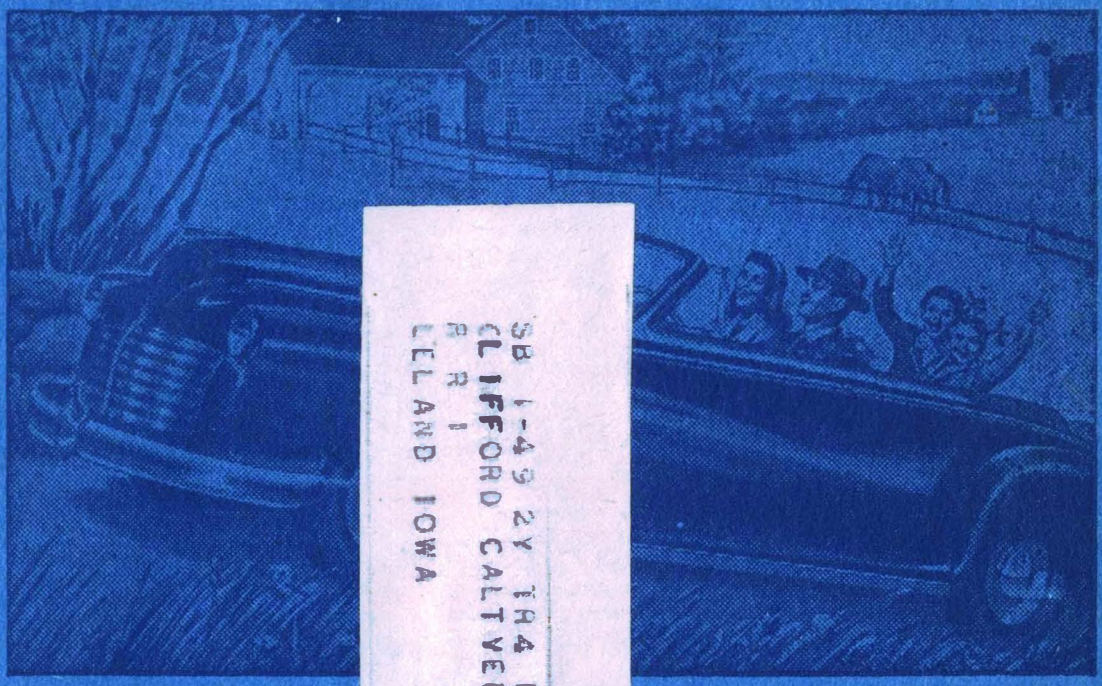

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