THE JUST AND THE UNJUST

By Vaughan Kester
Author of The Prodigal Judge

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CHAPTER VI.—(Continued.)

"You look tired, colonel," he said. "Why don't you stretch out on that lounge yonder and take a nap?"

"I think I shall, Andy, if you and Watt don't mind." And the colonel quitted his chair.

"Better put your coat over you," advised the gambler.

He watched the colonel as he made himself comfortable on the lounge, then he lighted a fresh cigar, tilted his chair against the wall and with head thrown back studied the ceiling. Watt Harbison made one or two tentative attempts at conversation, to which Gilmore briefly responded, then the young fellow also became a thoughtful. He fell to watching the gambler's strong profile which the lamp silhouetted against the opposite wall; then drowsiness completely overcame him and he slept in his chair with his head fallen forward on his breast.

Gilmore, alert and sleepless, smoked on; he was thinking of Evelyn Langham. After his interview with her husband that afternoon he had gone to his own apartment. His bedroom adjoined North's parlor and through the flimsy lath and plaster partition he had distinctly heard a woman's voice. The sound of that voice and the suspicion it instantly begot added to his furious hatred of North, for he had long suspected that something more than friendship existed between Marshall Langham's wife and Marshall Langham's friend.

"Damn him!" thought the gambler. "I'll fix him yet!" And he puffed at his cigar viciously.

He had made sure that North's mysterious visitor was Evelyn Langham, for when she left the building he himself had followed her. Out of the dregs of his nature this foolish mad passion of his had arisen to torture him; he had never spoken with Langham's wife, probably she knew him by sight, nothing more; but still his game, the waiting game he had ben forced to play, was working itself out better than he had even hoped! At last he had Marshall Langham where he wanted him, where he could make him feel his power. Langham would not be able to raise the money required to cover up those forgeries, and on the basis of silence he would make his bargain with the lawyer.

Gilmore pondered this problem for the better part of an hour, considering it from every conceivable angle; then suddenly the expression of his face changed, he forgot for the moment his ambitions and his desires, his hatred and his love; he thought he heard the click of the old-fashioned latch on the front gate. He remembered that it could be raised only with difficulty. Next he heard the sound of footsteps approaching the house. They seemed to come haltingly down the narrow brick path which the wind had swept clear of snow.

Mr. Gilmore was blessed with a steadiness of nerve known to but few men, yet the hour and the occasion had their influence with him. He stood erect; now the steps which had paused for a moment seemed to recede; it was as if the intruder, whoever he might be, had come almost to the front door and had then, for some inexplicable reason, gone back to the street. Gilmore even imagined him as standing there with his hand on the latch of the gate. He was tempted to rouse his two companions, but he did not, and then, as he still stood with his senses tense, he heard the steps again approach the front door. With a glance in the direction of the colonel and his nephew to assure himself that they still slept, Gilmore rather shamefacedly slipped his right hand under the tails of his coat, tiptoed into the hall and paused there close by the parlor door. The steps outside continued, he heard the porch floor give under a weight, and then some one rapped softly on the door.

Gilmore waited an instant; the rap was repeated; he stepped to the door, shot the bolt and opened it. The storm had passed; it was now cold and clear, a brilliant, starlit, winter's night. He saw the man on the porch clearly as he stood there with the world in white at his back. Gilmore instantly recognized him, and his hand came from under the tails of his coat; he closed the door softly.

"What sort of a joke is this, Marsh?" he demanded in a whisper.

"Joke?" repeated the lawyer in a thick husky voice, as he took an uncertain step toward the gambler.

"Your coming here at this hour; if it isn't a joke, what is it?"

Gilmore saw tha his face was flushed with drink, while his eyes shone with a light he had never seen in them before. He must have been abroad in the storm for some time, for the snow had lodged in the rim of his hat and his shoulders were still white with it; now and again a paroxysm of shivering seized him.

"Whiskey chill," thought the gambler. "Come in, Marsh!" he said, but Langham seemed to draw back instinctively.

"No, I guess not, Andy!" and a sickly pallor overspread his face.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Gilmore.

"I want to see you," said the other. "I cant' go home yet." He swayed heavily. "I need to talk to you on a matter of business. Come on out—come on off of here;" and he led the way down the porch steps. "Whom have you in there with you?" he questioned when he had drawn Gilmore a little way along the path.

"The colonel and Watt Harbison."

"No one else?"

"No."

"Do they know I'm here?"

"I guess not, they were asleep two minutes ago."

"That's good. I don't want to see them, I want to see you."

"Wouldn't it keep, Marsh?" asked Gilmore.

"No, sir, it wouldn't keep; I want to tell you just what I think of you, you damn——"

"Oh, that will keep, Marsh, any time will do for that; anyway, you have told me something like that already! When you sober up——"

"Do you think I'm drunk?"

"I don't think anything about it."

"Well, maybe I am, I have been under a strain. But I'm not too drunk to attend to business; I am never too drunk for that. I wish to say I have the money——"

His lips twitched, and Gilmore, watching him furtively, saw that he was again shivering.

"You got what, Marsh?" demanded Gilmore in a whisper.

"The money, the money I owe you!"

"Oh, I see!" He fell back a step and stared at Langham; there was apprehension dawning in his eyes. "Where did you get it?" he asked.

But Langham shook his head.

"That's my business; it's enough for you to get your money."

"Well, you were quick about it," said Gilmore, and he rested his hand on the lawyer's arm.

Langham moved a step aside.

"You threatened me," he said resentfully, but with drunken dignity. "You were going to smash me; I wish to say that now you can smash and be damned! I have the money——"

"Oh, come, Marsh! Don't you feel cut up about that; I didn't mean to make you mad; you mustn't hold that against me!"

"You come to my office tomorrow and get your money," said Langham, still with dignity. "I've been under a great strain getting that money, and now I'm done with you——"

Gilmore laughed.

"What are you laughing at?"

"You, you fool! But you aren't done with me; we'll be closer friends than ever after this. Just now you are too funny for me to take seriously. You go home and sleep off this drunk; that's my advice to you! I'd give a good deal to know where you have been and what sort of a fool you have been making of yourself since I saw you last!" added Gilmore.

"Don't you worry about me; I'm all right. What I want to say is, lend me your keys; I can't go home this way—lend me your keys and I'll go to your roms and sleep it off."

"All right, Marsh; think you can get there?"

"Of course; I'm all right."

"And you'll go there if I give you my keys—you'll go nowhere else?"

"Of course I won't, Andy!"

"You won't stop to talk with any one?"

"Who'll I find to talk with at this time of the night?" laughed the drunken man derisively. "It's 3 o'clock! Say, Andy, who'll I find to talk to?"

"By God, I hope no one, you fool!" muttered Gilmore.

"Well, give me the keys, Andy. I'll go along and get to bed, and I want you to forget this conversation——"

"Oh, I'll forget it all right, Marsh—but you won't after you come to your senses!" he added under his breath.

"Give me the keys—thanks. Good night, Andy! I'll see you in the morning."

He reeled uncertainly down the path, cursing his treacherous footing as he went. At the gate he paused and waved an unsteady farewell to the gambler, who stood on the porch staring after him.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BEAUTY OF ELIZABETH.

His interview with Evelyn Langham left North with a sense of moral nausea, yet he felt he had somehow failed in his comprehension of her, that she had not meant him to understand her as he had; that, after all, perhaps the significance he had given to her words was of his own imagining.

He waited in his room until she should have time to be well on her way home, then hurried downstairs. He was to dine at the Herberts' at 7 o'clock, and as their place was but scant two miles from town, he determined to walk. He crossed the Square, only stopping to speak with the little lamplighter, and 20 minutes later Mount Hope, in the cold breath of the storm, had dwindled to a huddle of faint ghostly lights on the hillside and in the valley.

The Herbert home, a showy country place in a region of farms, merited a name; but no one except Mrs. Herbert, who in the first flush of possession determined so to dignify it, had ever made use of the name she had chosen after much deliberation. General Herbert himself called it simply the farm, while to the neighbors and the dwellers in Mount Hope it was known as the general's place, which perhaps sufficiently distinguished it; for its owner was still always spoken of as the general, though since the war he had been governor of his state.

Rather less than half a century before, Daniel Herbert, then a country urchin tending cattle on the hillside where now stood his turreted stone mansion, had decided that some day when he should be rich he would return and buy that hillside and the great reach of flat river-bottom that lay adjacent to it, and there build his home. His worldly goods at the time of this decision consisted of a pair of jeans trousers, a hickory shirt, and a battered straw hat. For years he had forgotten his boyish ambition. He had made his way in the world; he had won success in his profession, the law; he had won even greater distinction as a soldier in the Civil War; he had been a national figure in politics, and he had been governor of his state. And then had come the country-bred man's hunger for the soil. He had remembered that hillside where as a boy he had tended his father's herds.

He was not a rich man, but he had married a rich woman, and it was her money that bought the many acres and built the many-turreted mansion. Wishing, perhaps, to mark the impermanency of the life there and to give it a purely holiday aspect, Mrs. Herbert had christened the place Idle Hour; but the governor, beyond occasional participation in local politics, never again resumed those activities by which he had so distinguished himself. He wore topboots and rode about the farm on an old gray horse, while his intimates were the neighboring farmers, with whom he talked crops and politics by the hour.

In pained surprise Mrs. Herbert, a woman of great ambition, had endured five years of this kind of life; with unspeakable bitterness of spirit she had seen the once potent name of Daniel Herbert disappear from the newspapers, and then she had died.

On her death the general became a rich and, in a way, a free man, for now he could, without the silent protest of his wife, recover the neglected lore of wood and field, and practice forgotten art that had in his boyhood come under the elastic head of chores. Elizabeth, his daughter, had never shared her mother's ambitions. Perhaps because she had always cared nothing for society. She was content to ride about the farm with her father, whom she greatly admired, and at whose eccentricities she only smiled.

To be Continued Tomorrow.

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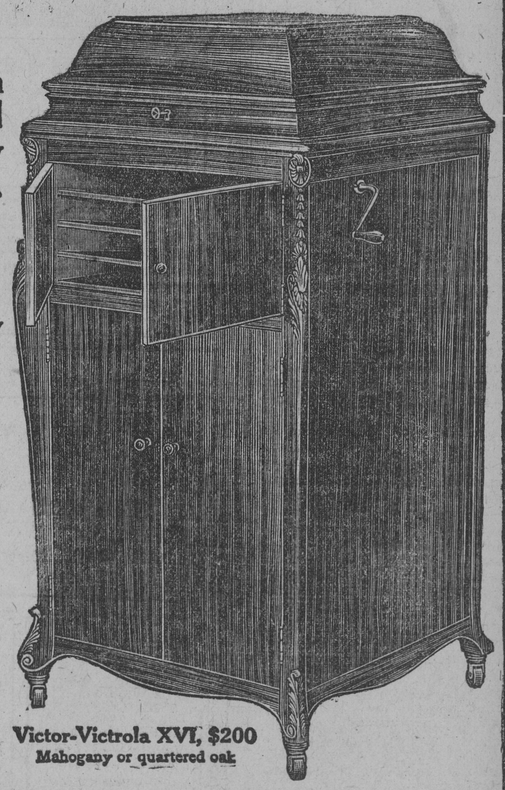

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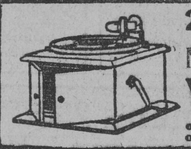

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