

PART SIX
Old Love
CHAPTER I

The Challenge

The visual scene, the spoken word, in their impact on the sensitive mind, have in them the inspiration, temper and irrationality of the vision and poetry of the written word. It was like a vision in a dream that George had witnessed the show in Damon Hall and listened in the wee-hours of the morning to Solomon's story of his early life. During the rest of the long vigil George wrote his first installment.

George appeared pale from the long sleepless night when he entered late that morning the Chief's office. It was a sunshiny brilliant morning, and rather cool for mid-summer. Mr. Barton looked well rested and in good humor despite the harrassing political issues that besieged him.

Sitting alone and in a meditative mood, tilted back in his favorite oaken chair, he glanced away from the little people in the Square to his right and rested his eyes on George standing in the doorway. His eyes twinkled with a smile in which his facial muscles hardly took part. "Come in, George," as he swung his chair to face him. He nodded to a place at his desk. He saw the manuscript under George's arm, and in that moment he appraised the situation and circumstance that brought his cub-reporter in the early forenoon instead of the early afternoon.

"Good morning, Mr. Barton," George said as he went to the chair indicated. "Perhaps I shouldn't have come so early, but..."

"But it isn't early to you, George," Mr. Barton said looking at him intently, "but late. You hardly slept on the story." And he smiled widely. "How much like your father you are, George. To him a challenge was to be met and solved as and when the spirit moved him. And a

good way it is. The first dawn of truth. Most always it's the real truth, because it's inspired: I expected as much from you." Reaching for the manuscript where George had put it on the desk, he glanced through a few pages. A slight flush was mounting on his pale cheeks.

"Almost uncanny," he said, as he put the sheets on the desk, "for a few moments it seemed to me that your father was sitting here with me, as he had on many occasions. That style, the phrasing! Your father speaking through the lines. May be it's our long association; and this, this..."

George reached for the manuscript, looked at it as if to prove a point, and put it back. "Apparently I cannot deny my father's way no matter how hard I try to be on my own."

"And a good way to be on, until you build your own. It'll be for this afternoon's edition. As for the rest of the story we better wait a few days. We don't want to open the throttle too wide. Give them time to digest. If at all." As George hesitated. "Is there anything else, George?"

"Just wondering about the blue pencil," George smiled faintly.

"Not much chance of tampering with your stuff," he looked kindly at George.

the morning after,
In the melancholy of a rainy day, George found himself assailed in a headlined story in the Morning Light. He was a callow youth, distorting the truth, and diverting the mature judgment of older people into the channels of phantasm. The Eventide and its editor didn't escape Scot-free. The Eventide ignored it completely, and George was warned not to refer to it in his next installment. The people must remain the sole arbiters.

Dinner hour ^{at} Samuel Dervin's, that evening. Blanca was at her usual place, in her chair across from her ^{father} at the table. Her mother sat in the obscurity of a corner in the room, farthest removed from the table. The silence in the room as Samuel ate, or pretended to eat, was heavier than usual. There was the darkness of a cloud on his frowning brow. He hadn't looked up from the table since he had sat down in gloom to his dinner. He hadn't spoken a word, not even to Blanca. He hadn't asked for his evening paper, nor for cold water. He sat in silence like a rock in isolation.

"Daddy," Blanca finally broke the silence, "Dad, why not go to Old Orchard for the weekend." This unduly prolonged stillness in the room, solemn and deathlike, was beginning to wear on her. She had to break the deadlock, no matter how. And anyway another trip in the family car to the beach was due them. There had been none since that wedding last June. She was longing for another evening at the beach alone with George. Her father offered no comment. She went on with a flattering smile, "You know most everybody is away for weekends during the hot summer months. Very little business on Saturdays. Why not close for the whole day." She ended with a flourish: "Imagine two whole days at the beach!"

Her father lifted his eyes and fixed her in his stare. There was scorn in his eyes. "And of course you'll have your dear cousin along!" he blustered out.

"George!"

"His face was contorted with hatred at the very mention of the name. "Yes, George!"

"What's so sudden with George?"

"Never liked that fellow, and now..."

"Now, what Daddy?" She was still keeping her voice level and under control, her eyes not showing anger. She knew her father's frequent

outbursts. This couldn't be more than just another one of them, to be soothed, like oil on turbulent waters, by her calm and ^rpersuasive words.

"Now, don't 'Dad' me. You know what George is, he'd sell his own mother for---"

"For what, Daddy?" Her voice still under control, she spit out the 'Daddy' with some emphasis of contempt. Her nostrils were flaring as she fixed him with her glare.

"Why, why," he cowered a little. But quickly regaining courage in his defiance he blurted out: "Why, why... I believe he would... his own mother..."

"What you believe doesn't count, father. And you know better!"

There was open scorn in her voice. The battle of the giants. And he knew that he tasted defeat again. No more the soft and heart-warming 'daddy' but the cold, harsh and defiant 'father'. How that word in her mouth could stab him to the quick!

"Whether he would or wouldn't isn't so much as the fact that you seem to cling to him, as if..." The bluster and fury ~~was~~ gone out of him. It was more of a plea.

"As if he were the only one?" she finished for him.

"As if he were the only one," he repeated stubbornly.

Was it a fatherly concern, or just a father's jealousy? Not as yet able to share her with anyone else. She was touched.

~~("But Daddy," she brightened him with her intimate smile, "you know")~~

"But Daddy," she brightened him with her intimate smile, "You know it isn't so. We are just friends -- friendly cousins. He has others, and so have I."

"Sure, he has this... this - Cynthia. That's her name, isn't it?"

"That's her name."

"I thought so."

"What did you think?"

"He and she."

-200-

"No it isn't like that at all. It's he and she, and Foster and she, and he and I, and Harold and I."

"No, of course you wouldn't know. All the talk about the two... In the woods, and even..."

Now his wife who had been sitting in the obscurity of silence through it all found her courage. It was her nephew who was being ^{assaulted} assaulted. Next to her daughter he was the only hope of her future. In a voice calm, as if speaking from a nebulous distance, she said, "You have no right to speak of him like that. You are jealous, because - because he is so much..." and she stumbled and fell silent.

"Because everybody is so much better than I," he spit out contemptuously without looking at her. "But that's nothing new... you god d-!" He stood up. His mood and gesture threatening. His wife remained sitting calmly. But Blanca rose and moved a few steps ^{if} as to stand him off. Stern as judgment she stood erect and faced him. "Now will you, please, tell me what's all about?" she flared at him.

He sat down before her contrite and meek. It didn't matter that that defeat, but why does it always have to end this way where he and his wife are concerned? Always his daughter is with her - and he ends up on the wrong side. What's all worth anyhow? This life of his - to come home every night, eat in silence, in contempt. Yes, in contempt! Even his daughter. Who are his friends? His business associates who would cut his throat? A man has business worries, he comes home sapped, and what does he find in his heart to comfort him? If a man only could cry. Would that ease his heartache? Can he help it if sometime his heart boils over, becomes uncontrollable and lashes out in fury? Doesn't his daughter understand that beneath this bluster and rage there is tenderness - even love! If only he had one to love, love as his own - his alone. He bowed his head, resting it on his arms.

Blanca's eyes were moist as she turned and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Dad, I am sorry. I should have known you didn't mean the things you said unless - unless something was upsetting you. What is it, Daddy?" Her voice was warm and caressing. Her mother smiled and nodded.

At her urging he raised his head, straightened, a light smile crossing his pallid face. He fumbled in his breast pocket, produced a letter in its opened envelope and handed it to her. It was in a silent funeral movement, and as morbid, as if in the presence of a dear departed friend - his physical remains before their eyes.

With the solemnity suitable to the occasion Blanca read the brief note:

"This is to notify you that lease on store #585 Congress Street, will not be renewed as of October 1, 1911, when same expires."

It was signed by Foster Forrest Sr.

She flushed visibly, her nostrils flaring. "Why, the impudent little misfit," she gasped, "the tightwad, the blackguard! Not enough that he - - -" She caught herself in the midst of her tirade. What difference what the little man did in the past, it's what he is trying to do to her father; to her and her mother. Without the store! She dared not think of the grave portents the future held for them in such a continuation sequence. She quickly recovered herself. "Oh, Daddy," she said, looking down at him tenderly, "plenty of other stores to be had."

"Where, on Pacific Street," he frowned, "where all the bums . . . !"

"Now, Daddy, you know better." And so did she. But she had to say something to alleviate the pain that charged the air in the room.

"One thing you can't do, Blanca," her father said grimly, "is teach me my business. That hotel across the street, the other customers! Once I lose the store I am licked, they'll belong to the new owner. The work of a lifetime gone to hell. Begin again as a fruit peddler - nothing else!"

"I am sure it won't come to that," she said weakly.

"what's to prevent it?" he said bitterly.

"Just that things are not simple," she demurred.

"Well, if you think of justice, there is no such thing," he said frowning. "At least not in business. It's everyone for himself. Sure enough he's got me in his paw. All I can do is squirm and moan - like a strangling rat."

Suddenly, as if she had just remembered, she said: "But what's George got to do with it?"

"Everything. For years I got along with Forrest. True, he upped his price everytime the lease was up for renewal. But that was his privilege. As the business grew he was entitled to his profit. Was only too glad to pay it. I called him to say that I'd be glad to discuss the matter of rental. But he was cold and bitter. It was a matter of personal concern - not money. . ."

"You said yourself you got along fine with him?"

"It's not me."

"It's not me!" She looked up in a baffled silence. "No, it couldn't be. . ."

"But it could," he said with a sardonic smile. He had gained a point with her, and that was something. He could read in her face that she was annoyed, and perhaps unpleasantly surprised. "He as much as admitted it."

"Admitted what!" she jumped up as if triggered by a tight inner spring on the point of breaking. To calm her emotion she walked to the window, and stood there looking out on the dark street.

"About that God-damn Dreen Thing," he spoke to her back.

She turned to him, her face a sharp blade of anger. "Yes, I know he hates Dreen, because of Lena. And now more because Foster is turning more and more to his mother - since the happening at the fire. But how is George mixed up in it, exactly? And we....?"

"He is your mother's - and mine - nephew," he said tartly through compressed lips. "And he wrote that report on that Thing."

"So he's trying to threaten you through George."

"He so much as hinted that a lot will depend how and if he goes on."

"The utter fool," Blanca was vehement, "doesn't he know that it would have the opposite effect on George!"

"That's George exactly. Your George!"

"Yours too, my dear father. You can be proud of him."

"Proud of him, too, when he cuts my throat! "

"Oh, come off your j - . He isn't cutting your throat. You'll survive. You don't expect him to withdraw because that old f - is threatening you? Now, really, do you?" She looked at him sharply, and threateningly. "This thing may be one of those that come to one like George - for a purpose. A good purpose, I hope. In his struggle for whatever his ambition might be - and I am sure I don't know what it might be - he needs this thing. Or what you call The Thing. It's in his blood. By all means I shall see that he has it, that nothing, nobody, not even you, interferes with it." She paused. She came into the light that shone in a circle over the dining room table. There was brightness in her eyes, and a light smile. "You'll see, Daddy, he'll come begging when George gets through with him."

"Such insufferable faith in a mere - " he shrugged his shoulders.

"Better you hadn't said it."

"You threatening too!"

"No, but you'd have to take it back."

"And who'd make me?"

"Yourself, Dad." And she favored him with her benevolent smile.