

Mr. Flahrel wondered what game it was he wanted to play.

But George understood.

CHAPTER III

Variations on a Theme of Conciliation And a Reo

Eastern Boulevard was deserted that early Sunday morning, and George felt at peace with himself and the world as he sauntered down the embankment to the lowest terrace overlooking the bay. To George this high point in the bay was like an impregnable fortress, its gentle curves surrounded on three sides by rocky ramparts. A fortress at once forbidding to an adventurous and fool-hardy invader from the sea, as well as a mighty lookout for the defender on land. On days when the air was crystal-clear, and there were many such days on this hill jutting into the sea, one could see objects with the clarity of a stereoscope: pictures framed on the eye-lens in bold relief and brilliance. One could follow from this vantage point the pinnacle of an ocean-going liner to its vanishing point into the curvature of the earth.

He found a bench and spread the fresh-smelling Sunday Edition of the *Eventide* on his lap. The chimera of the day before, fraught with the heartache of emotion, of decision and parting, was a distant illusion dissolving rapidly in the clean fresh air and bright warm sunlight. There was the elation in him of a feeling of well-being and freedom. Then his eyes caught the caption of his article, his last one at least for the time

being- and his mind swiftly swirled down into the dismal doldrum of dismay and doubt, as he was seized by the torture of self recrimination and denial. He was just a rebellious prig or he wouldn't write such absurdities. What does he know of politics. Taft is a good fellow. Why the gall against him? And the Boss playing along with him. What must he think of him now? Of all the dross, dribble and drivel! He thrust the paper aside. All the droll drivel of the others! The hot-mouthings, the mutterings, the gossips, the guesses, the blatant-blather of the guesser-gossips, the erudite gossings, the know-it-alls, and the fools! And he among them! They spread the red blood on white paper instead of black ink -- the poison-traders. Would the world be better off with mouth-to-mouth communication instead of the written word? To be sure there is the haranguer, the demagogue, the spell-binder; they can bespoil and plunder the soul as the poison-pen, but at least you have him before you, hear his voice and look at his crimson-bloated face, or the dry fig of a pale-face with the sneering straight line of thin white lips; his scurrilous pouting mouth, the Ogre in his bulging eye; and you know he is a screaming liar, a scurvey scabrous scapegrace, and an unscrupulous thief and charlatan, if at all you have a discerning soul. If your mind is unalerted you listen to the glib and flamboyant tongue and you are enchanted, for he has the magic of the snake-charmer. Carried away by his own words, he carries away the unwary with him - to their own undoing. The conciliation between his ego and his tongue is spilled over to his audience. And they struggle to sever and rid themselves of the ensnaring invisible threads that hold them ever tighter, and there is rebellion in their hearts, and a bit of tug-of-war, but in the end the Grand Conciliation covers them all like the waters of the sea, and they succumb and they are the victims. And the demi-god of the empty phrase, and the platitude, and the big lie stands in his unholy and heroic proportions a colossus, leering in his final and complete victory.

But often the spoken empty phrase floats away and is sunk by the wight

^{the} of reason. The reign of the lying word may be brief, to vanish like smoke in the upper atmosphere of clarity. But not so with the written word. It stands out like a monument; and the poison-pen like a rapier. Those insidious words, black on white, they stand out crafty and bold on the seeming white purity of ^{a placid} background; and bore into your brain and marrow like a poisoned arrow. Like the fang of the cobra it spills its venom in the jungle of inuendo, in the insinuation of the sly-word; the misrepresentation, and misinterpretation; in the abuse of the truth, by the protestation of the half-truth. The truth and the falsehood, the truism and the trick march side by side in the narrow path of the treasonable mind. And in the mouth of the treason-speaker, ^{and so in the written word,} the agony of the twisted truth which is the grand lie, is the unspeakable treachery which is polished and shined and glozed over so that the written word may look more the genuine article of innocence and goodness.

He thrust the paper away from him, and the light breeze that suddenly sprang up flapped and shuffled it around his feet. He kicked it sharply away. It arose like a prehistoric bird and floated out to sea. "Good riddance," he murmured smiling, "hope I never see it again."

George reached the top of the hill where a broad macadam road was leading off to the right. A short distance and he would descend to the beach and the bathing cabins. A good swim would refresh him, and it was too nice a day not to indulge in his favorite sport. Especially the last day home. Where he was going there was no ocean-bathing for nigh a hundred miles. He hadn't walked far before he heard the exciting tooting of a horn and the onrush of a shiny new automobile that halted with screeching brakes in front of him. Instinctively he jumped aside and stood ~~and stood~~ on the shoulder of the road, his nerves a bit ruffled. There came to him a chorus of laughing voices, one of which he recognized unmistakably belonging to Mr. Dreen.

"Imagine you dropping out of nowhere, George," Solomon chuckled.

"I suppose I should be thankful for not running me over," George answered after a bit, regaining his composure.

"Rather a disgraceful thing to do to a fellow, Solomon," Lena said with mock chagrin. "Now, if Foster were driving I'd put it to inexperience, but you had the car three days."

"Now isn't it a long time to be driving!" Solomon rebuked her good-naturedly, facing about to where she was sitting in the rear. "But my apologies: my share in the shameful wish to surprise you, George. But I was able to halt in time, wasn't I, Lena?"

"Just where'd I be if Foster had been driving!" George wondered aloud, a bit ironically.

"Foster will be driving soon enough," Solomon said. "He had his first lesson this morning. A wonderful road for learning. Especially Sunday mornings. Not a soul until you showed up."

"This is our graduation present to Foster," Lena was bubbling over with joy.

"Only he didn't know it till about two hours ago," Solomon winked at George. "Had to learn to handle it myself, before presenting it to our... to our... to...!"

"A handsome thing," George came to his rescue. Still, Solomon was in that other world, George thought. He had made a desperate effort to reach out and over and had failed. The word "son" had eluded him and stuck in his throat. So near, on the threshold of Foster's world. And yet... Even the controlled voice of the placid and experienced vocalizer had faltered at the crucial test. Maybe better so. Not time yet, Solomon, to call him your own. Well — better so! "Even smells new," he added. "Looks lower, and more streamlined than the Franklin. What's its name?"

"Reo," Solomon said proudly.

At Solomon's side on the front seat Foster sat in silence with his own thoughts. He couldn't help appreciate the handsome gift, neither could

the sacrifice his mother and stepfather had made escape him. Easy enough to acknowledge it from his mother. But was he of a mind to do so with this strange man, who by some strange quirk of fate had married his mother?

Two worlds so near, yet...!

George read the turmoil in Foster's mind, but chose to ignore it.

He said, "Quite a difference, Foster, between this and the old man's electric cubicle that crawls at ten miles per..."

Foster colored, but said nothing.

Solomon anxious to avoid further embarrassment to Foster, said: "If you'd see your way to remain the summer here, George, what fun you and our -- Foster could have with the automobile." He looked yearningly toward Foster for some small sign of recognition. How he'd like to identify himself with this splendid example of American youth!

The look on Solomon's face was almost pathetic. It didn't escape Lena's eyes. She said to George, "Wouldn't you come in and sit by me here." She opened the door, and moved over to make room for him.

"With pleasure," as George climbed in.

"A thrill to sit here," Lena marveled as she took George's arm.

Solomon said, "Wouldn't you want to sit behind the wheel once more, Foster, to get the feel of it. Or maybe drive it?"

"Yes -- 'Dad'" Foster said.

The word swept so suddenly from Foster's lips that they looked up to him with eyes overwhelmed with emotion, and a feeling of great joy was in them, but not unmixed with a sense of consternation. They were not fooled into the belief that this was a complete surrender by Foster, but that it was a first step there could be no doubt. But was it so sudden as far as Foster was concerned? Could they have looked into his young heart they would have seen how eagerly he had longed to pronounce the word that had been denied him since early childhood. To taste it, to listen to its sound -- "Dad"! He had learned to respect this large, big-hearted man. Could he -- love!

But first -- first, conciliation!