

But that Dreen fellow with his girl-show, what influence would he have on Foster? This George seems to ^{be} well taken up with that foreigner and he was sure to take his grandson along with him.

There was nothing personal in Mr. Forrest's dislike of Solomon Dreen. If Solomon had not married Lena, or had not owned the ~~the~~ girl-show, he would have ignored him (and his type) if ever he had crossed his path. There could be no conflict between two personalities so far apart as the distant poles, living in eternally different worlds. He would ^{bait} a bear if it annoyed him, or destroy a rat because it was repulsive to him - by remote control as it were. But George was something else, for he threatened to invade his personal world, his own world. George was more formidable because he was of his world. And George couldn't be ignored even though he claimed not any of the Mayflower Pilgrims as an ancestor.

And through the welter of conflict of thought and emotion one path, one avenue of attack, lay clear before him - the path that led to the editorial room of the Eventide.

End of Chapter V

CHAPTER V

Mr. Black and Mr. Forrest

The prevailing conciliatory mood of the night before toward bride and groom was still with George the following morning on his way to the Eventide to write his report. Reaching the Square where he was to enter the City Room of the Eventide he decided to continue to the Library to write his report there. The hour was early but he found the massive doors of the old Library slightly ajar - ~~just been opened~~. Mounting the one flight of flagstone steps he entered the stillness and coolness of the quadrangular reading room.

Miss Taylor had obviously just put on her workaday frock and was reaching out for the duster when she saw George entering. She nodded a smile to him and took up her task of dusting (recovering quickly from the surprise

of seeing him so early in the library) ~~and~~ and arranging and rearranging the yellowed ancient volumes on the shelves.

Miss Taylor was of medium height and slight build, with the austere, nun-like white transparency of face, which was augmented by a white crown of hair. She had been recently elevated to the position of associate librarian, second only to Miss Printe, librarian-in-chief. And it was through her industry this morning that she had intended to show her gratitude to Miss Printe, who was largely responsible for her new post. This recognition was a great consolation to her in the waste of middle-aged spinsterhood. It was like a beacon to her, of new hope and a new life. Having started her dusting at the opposite end of the room, she kept moving steadily, though imperceptibly, in the direction of George, casting an occasional watery look at him from her pale-blue eyes. They were kindly eyes, set in the mold of her ascetic face, somewhat saddened, and a little puffed around the eyelids. (Was it from crying over young years lost, and spent to no advantage?) She caught surreptitious glances at George, the urge in her to speak to him so great that it brought a brilliancy to her eyes and a slight crimson to her pale cheeks. She hesitated and at first couldn't find the words, but when she was quite near him - almost in front of him - she blurted out: "Rather unusual, Mr. Sheraton, coming this early, especially with no school - " She caught herself and became silent, as if fearful that in her enthusiasm she had broken the cardinal rule of silence, and ^{had} spoken too loudly. Shushing herself mentally, she went on in a hushed voice: "Must be something important that brings you here."

"I find it quiet and peaceful here mornings."

"I try to keep this room quiet at all times," she demured.

"Sure you do. But the effort itself of reining in exuberant youth may be disturbing."

"I quite agree," she smiled, "there always are stirrings about, no matter how hard one tries. A ripple here, a ripple there, and they form

a whirlpool of noise if you don't stop them." Then she went on dusting for a while, but always in the vicinity of George, always with a stealthy glance at him. George conscious of her manneuverings found them more disturbing than if she were clamoring on top of her voice. Finally to get rid of her he asked her if she had any information on Mr. Jerome Black that he might use in his piece. It was a stab in the dark, but not too strange, for Mr. Black was a prominent citizen with a large catalogue of various and diverse activities. There could be, and probably there were, items newsworthy about him. "Could you dig them up for me?" he asked. "If it isn't too much..."

"Mr. Black!" She jumped at the name. "You mean the Mr. Black - the groom at Old Orchard!"

"Why, yes, what's so strange -?"

"Mr. Black, of course," she interrupted him. "Of course!"

George stared at her and wondered at her excitement. Was it an old maid's vicarious thrill at the thought (at the reality?) of her lover's embrace in the arms of another woman? She returned his stare with a proud gaze of her own: "I happen to know a great deal about Jerry - Mr. Black that is. I knew him before he married the rich Lamdon girl. But I wouldn't say it was for her father's extensive real-estate holdings, which eventually went to him. She was a pretty little red-head, and quite a nice person in her own right. Jerry as man and boy, believe me, cut an imposing figure. Sincere and generous! Ah yes," nostalgically, "we met many times and at many affairs." She fell silent; and George didn't interrupt it, but tried to go back with her to the days when the formidable and prominent Mr. Black was a mere strippling, inconceivable as that ^{might} seem from this distance. He was struck by the play of strong emotions he observed in her. "Yes," she went on, "I followed the affair between him and Arlene quite - er - well, shall I say, quite avidly. Why not? He meant a lot to

... no envy or jealousy, but benignity and best

"Well!" he said, not meaning to look surprised, for he found himself quite in agreement with her.

"You needn't look so surprised," she snapped, "why, he is the kindest of men. Sure, he has bulk and a blustering manner; but he never blusters about his benefactions. Yet there isn't a charity or a public welfare in town in which he is not directly or indirectly concerned. Whose money built that new Home-for-the-Aged, or the Recreation Center? And whose money will go into refurbishing this old dilapidated building? I understand he was for putting up a new one, but the trustees voted that down. They stored great value in it as a landmark. But I know Jerry's (Another vicarious thrill to her in pronouncing the old beloved name.) temper and his ambition for things new and modern. There was quite a ruckus, but in the end it was Jerry who yielded, and still willing to let his funds go into the project. Now, isn't he a dear? The dear boy! But it's all shush-shush with him. In fact anonymity is a first condition with him, or he remains away. Right now the city is profiting by his business enterprises and largess as of no other inhabitant. And yet all the inuendos, the hate-mongering and the baiting! Her face by now was quite flushed with righteous ^{indignation} at the real and imaginary and unseen enemies of Mr. Black. Recovering her composure, she added after a while. "Of course they say he rides rough-shod over his opponents in business - but that's business. And he loves competition, and he loves to ride them. But just for the sport of it, not for the money in it. It only shows up the strength of character in the man. Ruthlessness against our enemies who seek our destruction is rooted in our nature, and he doesn't try to glose it over. He is always true to himself."

"What a glowing tribute!" George muttered as if to himself.

"True, every word of it."

"How old is he?"

"What's age got to do with it?"

"Just a reporter's curiosity."

"No, he isn't too old to enjoy the sweet fruit of love, if that's what you mean. His wife has been dead these years, his children well provided for - why not take to him a pretty young woman! To hear the loud braying you'd think the man is committing a crime or a sin under god."

"But I thought..." What George thought he wouldn't speak aloud. But he wasn't sure himself what was in his mind then. He thought, for instance, that now the motherly instinct of protecting her brood was speaking in her. But that she would be insulted if he even hinted at it.

"I know what you think," she broke in. He was glad of the interruption. "A man of fifty-three, or fifty-five, is a Methuselah to you. I know. When I was ten I thought my sister, who was your age then, was an old woman. You see age is relative. You think me an old maid, and you are right. But when I was twenty-five I already was an old maid. When I was your age a person beyond forty was incomprehensible. Now at middle-age, having passed the stage of enforced inhibitions, and having arrived at the safe haven of old-spinsterhood, I find sun and warmth again in my world,

and I am happy again as I haven't been for a long while. I feel myself a complete person, with all the attributes and complements of a whole, wholesome and happy being. I passed the jitter-stage of being an old maid, for I know what it is to be one. I came, I saw, I conquered. I am past the years of storm and striving and longing. And I laugh at the snickerings behind my back. 'Here comes the grey-head with the rattling bones,' they say, 'she can't see anybody having fun because she remained an old, old... Here she comes the old hag, rustling her skirts, from the other side of the grave....' But I laugh in their faces - at least I smile. You see I am as free as a bird, after the passions and violences have left me." She paused and came over and stood by his side. Then she put her hand on his shoulder and looked down into his eyes, as an older sister would. "You asked me for some items, and here ~~here~~ I go on babbling, truly like an old maid."

"Thank you, Miss Taylor, but that wouldn't be necessary. They couldn't give me half as much as what you already have told me."

"I didn't realize..."

"Of course you didn't. But you confirmed what was already in my mind. I am grateful indeed...Only ten," as he looked at the clock on the wall, "thought it was much later."

"Then you won't condemn him with the rest," she was almost pleading.

As he was about ^{to} answer Miss Printe came in. Trotting with princely gait in her footsteps was Tom-the-Sphinx, a huge feline, (named so) because he very seldom made a sound. Or so was his reputation. Though Miss Printe, who brought him up from kittenhood, would swear that on several occasions he did talk, cat-talk, and that his vocal chords were quite in good order. "It's just that he is too dignified to speak to all manner of people," Miss Printe would explain further, "and on trivial matters. Just that he feels the heavy ^{responsibility} ~~weight~~ thrust upon him of keeping watch over the gold fish in the small pool in the garden below."

George put out a hand and tried to pat his sleek fur, but Tommy just glared at him and began knocking his tail on the floor with such rage that George snatched his hand away.

Miss Printe gave a jubilant laugh. "He doesn't know ^{you} well enough," she said. "Now, Tommy, say hello to M^r. Sheraton."

But Tommy just goggled his eyes at him and said nothing.

"Mr. Sheraton is too formal for Tom. I don't believe he likes the sound of it," George said.

"All right," Miss Printe laughed her tinkling gurgling laugh, "All right, Tommie, say hello to George."

At that Tommy put a pair of paws on George's knee and looked up in-
to his face, with ^{what} Miss Printe averred afterward was the nearest thing to a smile, and twirling his tail in a friendly fashion ~~he~~ opened his pink mouth wide as if to speak. But only a yawn came out. Then as if to mend his bad manners he nuzzled his nose and mustaches on George's other knee and purred so loud that George felt the strong vibrations running up his legs with a tickling sensation. After a couple of rubs of his head against the same knee, feeling that he had bestowed his favors long enough on George, he shook himself a couple of times and headed straight for the fishes down below.

"Very faithful to his charges," Miss Printe remarked.

Miss Taylor turning to George: "You didn't say how you'd write it."

"You wrote it for ^{almost} me, word for word."

"What's all the secret^c about?" Miss Printe asked.

"Mr. Sheraton has the report on the Black Wedding," Miss Taylor said uncertainly, and rather timidly, afraid that her ^{past} secret love for Mr. Black might now be divulged. Especially she didn't want Miss Printe to know.

"Your assignment?" Miss Printe wondered aloud.

"Unfortunately it is," George said.

"Well, it's a matter of opinion - in more ways than one," Miss Printe

said airily, "if I were to venture an opinion... which I am not." She gave George a ^{sly} look of pity, as if she had let him down and left him to stew in his own juices. "The best I can do for you is to let you see what the Morning Light had to say about it." And then after another pause: "My advice for what's worth, ~~be~~ watch your step."

"I'd rather not see the 'Light'," George said, "I want my own impression... and ---" as he looked to Miss Taylor, who grimaced a denial of his any reference to her -- "and not to be biased by another's opinion."

"Bias is hardly the word," Miss Printe hastened to correct him. "Don't they whop it up though. Take him literally apart. But it's to be expected. The old feud between Forrest and Black. And if I may use a pun: As between the two the Forest is really Black."

"Which means in my interpretation," George said seriously, "that Black will ultimately prevail."

"That could be-----" Miss Taylor ventured an opinion, "but as of now Mr. Forrest holds a controlling interest in the Morning Light....."

"Which is just fine," George said laconically, "that puts me right in the middle. Especially if he has stocks in the Eventide."

"Mr. Black may be ahead of him there," Miss Printe tried to reassure him, "but even if he isn't you'll have Mr. Barton on your side. And what more could you ask?"

"Well, I was promised a free hand by the Chief," George stated flatly, a bit vehemently. Not so much against Mr. Barton, as against a fate that brought him into this thing on only his second assignment. "That Jack Gardner! I see now why he palmed this thing off on me. This thing, this mess...!"

"You can take it on the chin better than Jack. He is an Ace, and you are a neophyte," Miss Printe said. "Besides, he has children. With him it's a job. With you - just a temporary....."

"And with the Sheraton touch..." Miss Taylor obliged, "you'll

probably get away with it."

"You made a statement, Miss Printe, about the Chief being on my side. You seemed quite positive."

"It's an open secret that Mr. Barton bears no great love for Mr. Forrest Senior," Miss Printe smiled enigmatically.

"But if the stakes are too high?"

"Mr. Barton can well take care of himself. He doesn't hold his position by sufferance you know. He really is a great editor. Good enough for a great metropoleran Daily. Rumors had it, he had been offered one in Boston. But he tenaciously holds on to his house and garden here. And the Maine woods in the fall, going hunting with his friends. And his 'slippers, where I know where they are'. So he had been quoted. Oh, he'll stand up all right."

Downstairs they found Tommy-the-Sphinx parading his huge bulk under the splashing fountain, where the fish disported in the clear water of the pool in the sparkling sun. Round and round they went, causing a ripple and a bubble as they came to the surface for a nibble. Not a jitter, nor a blink of fear in a fishy eye as the monster stood on the brink and thrust a paw into their habitat. For they well knew that paw to be the hand of peace and good-will between him and them. Then he stood arching his back in undulating waves in the direction of Miss Printe's love pats. Then brute the left her for his march of vigilance, and Miss Printe stood there watching him. The pool, the fish, the flowers and the background of vivid green of the little garden made a scene that elated her, and which she watched with ~~astonishing~~ fascination. George watched her. In her brilliant soft-print summer frock, gay with the colors of blossoms, she added a cheerful note to the shimmer of the fountain, in which the sunbeams played, a delicate softness; a ~~renewed~~ hope and a prayer of Spring!

Like a vestal in the midst of ^{the} burgeoning growth and the awakening and rebirth of Life, a priestess bearing the censers of Life's fragrance in a salute to the Spring Deity!

^f Mr. Harbour Bibbly (nicknamed, "the Bible-Quoting-Mr. Bibbly" ^b by his students), teacher of English and Latin, came in.

George realized why Miss Printe wore her most decorative prints.

"Good morning, Miss Printe," Mr. Bibbly displayed a tight-lipped, though generous smile.

"Good morning ~~to you~~, Mr. Bibbly," Miss Printe smiled back. Turning to where George was standing, "surely, Mr. Bibbly, you ~~must~~ know Mr. Sheraton."

"Ah, George!" as if he had just become aware of George's presence, "what would you be doing this early here?" Realizing that his own presence was just as much open to question: "But of course, your work. Research!" A slight flush crossed his cheek-bones, fading out on his forehead, as he wondered whether George guessed the reason of his being here at this unwarranted time. What these youngsters don't know about their teachers! ~~Although, I don't know~~ And he remembered the case of the sub-master and his rumored affair with the doughty and ample bosomed mathematics teacher, and the ditties the students had composed in their honor.

George said politely: "Digging up a few facts... Came down here to say hello to Tommy before leaving."

"Surely a noble gesture, since Tommy is sensitive about such things. Especially where his friends are concerned."

"Am I counted in?" George looked to Miss Printe.

"A friend of Miss Printe is a friend of Tommy," and Mr. Bibbly smiled his broad smile displaying a sturdy line of teeth.

What a guy this Bibbly is, George thought; solid, compact, yet sensitive. Perhaps not an original thinker, but what he knew of English Lit and the Bible, especially the Bible, was solid. His quotations from that

source were frequent and were delivered with such impact and thundering voice that he was given a second appellation of Thundering Jehovah. And indeed that Israelitish deity could find no grounds for offense in that application, for Mr. Bibbly quoted and interpreted Him ~~so~~ nobly. And with what warmth and compassion!

Even now George could hear the affect^oinate graciousness and simple sincerity of voice, as with face crimson and eyes flashing he bored into the class: "And a stranger shalt thou not wrong, neither shalt thou oppress him, for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise and they cry to Me, I will surely hear their cry. And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless." And on a tenderer note, pleading: "If thou at all take thy neighbor's raiment to pledge thou shalt restore it unto him by that the sun goes down. For that is his only covering, it is his garment for his skin: wherein shall he sleep? And it shall come to pass, when he crieth unto Me, that I will hear, for I am gracious." And again in the gentle voice of the gentle spirit of Him Who preached the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for their's is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. Think not that I come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled....."