

The Man Nobody Knew

By HOLWORTHY HALL

(Copyright by Dodd, Mead & Co., Inc.)

CHAPTER X—Continued.

—11—

"I'm sorry. Business worries?"

"Why—in a way, yes."

The doctor achieved a perfect circuit, and beamed at it.

"Something else?"

"A good deal else," said Hilliard, abstracted. "But that's no reason for me to bother you with it. I didn't know it was so apparent."

Silence.

"It's not my habit," said the doctor presently, "to offer any advice unless I'm asked for it. Gratuitous advice never did anybody any good. And nobody takes it unless it costs something—and not often then. And I'm neither your regular physician nor your confessor. But if I had made a diagnosis at this present minute I'd say that you need a preacher a great deal more than you do a doctor."

"I . . . I do," said Hilliard, looking up sharply. "Only . . . it's out of the question. Just personal things, doctor—nothing I can very well talk about."

"Your trouble," said Doctor Durant, "isn't physical as much as it is spiritual. It's nothing but taut nerves. It's nothing but your struggle against the restraints you put upon yourself. How do I know? You've told me so . . . every time I've seen you. It's in your face, my boy. It's in your eyes. Constantly. And it looks as though the conference is about over . . . because if that isn't Carol coming up the steps, my ears aren't half as good as they used to be."

Both men were on their feet as she came in, swirling.

"Oh!" she cried to Hilliard. "I didn't know you were coming up to-night! Suppose I'd missed you!"

He merely smiled, and made no answer; nor did he speak to her until after the doctor, protesting a sudden desire for solitude, had waved them hospitably out of the study into the living room. Carol was in the old familiar corner of the sofa; Hilliard was standing by the fireplace, peering down into the empty grate. He coughed harshly, and an expression of utter hopelessness crept into his eyes. He turned abruptly.

"Well," he said, "just how much would you have cared if you had?"

There was a stately old lamp standing at height behind the sofa; its shadows were gracious and its light, as it crept through a shade of painted velvet, touched Carol softly, in a delicacy of radiance which was infinitely caressing. Her hands were lying idle in her lap; she bent her head, and viewed them studiously.

"Why, I should have cared a great deal," she said. "I'm always disappointed when I miss seeing a friend of mine. What makes you so pessimistic, all of a sudden?"

Hilliard reddened, and his eyes grew brighter.

"Friendship!" he said tardily. "What an accordionlike sort of thing that is!"

"Why, Mr. Hilliard!" Her tone was at the same time interrogatory and reproachful.

"Oh, I'm not speaking of you," he said. "Only of the thing itself. . . . It's big or little, close or distant—and it hasn't anything to say about it . . . You'll have to excuse me—I was thinking out loud . . ."

"Please do!" she said. "You were on the way to be interesting. Think out loud some more."

Hilliard glanced sharply at her. "Don't laugh at me!" he said, almost roughly. "For heaven's sake, don't you know that the one time you shouldn't laugh at a man is when he deserves it?"

Carol's attitude was vaguely less suggestive of ease.

"I wasn't laughing at you," she said, "truly. But what you said was so . . . so queer."

"Oh, yes." Hilliard's accent was very flat. "I suppose it was. It must have been . . . I always seem to be more or less up in the air when I come to see you, don't I? The last time we talked about friendship—"

"But that was at least a month ago," she said hastily, "and in the meantime, you've been just as nice and cheerful as anybody. I thought you were all over your troubles."

"Cheerfulness wasn't what you asked for," Hilliard swallowed hard. "I . . . I came up here, Miss Durant, to have a really serious talk with you . . . really serious. It's been delayed too long already. It took me two solid days to get my courage up to it. And . . . and now I'm here, I don't even know how to begin."

He scowled heavily into the vacant fireplace, and held out his palms with a mechanic gesture as though to warm them at an imaginary blaze. "You know," he said absently, "your father is a very extraordinary man—very."

The compliment to the doctor had its invariable effect upon her; she glowed under it.

"I've always known that . . . I'm glad you realize it, too."

He stood erect, and faced her. "I . . . it came to me, when I was talking to him, what a great privilege it must be for you to have his advice—and his sympathy . . . when you

need it. And there are so few—so incredibly few—people who make you feel like that. One in a thousand. Or, one in ten thousand. People who lift you clear of your trivial little self—and make you think in terms of principles, and not of your own selfish ideas—and still don't preach. . . . It must be a privilege."

"It isn't only for me," she said. "He has enough sympathy for anyone who asks for it. He isn't very worldly—you've noticed that? He can't believe that anybody, or anything, is really bad . . . and perhaps that's why people come to him so. Of course, it may be that just because he's my father, I—"

"No," Hilliard shook his head. "I've seen a good many fathers, and next to mine. . . . My own was a wonderful man, too, but I never appreciated him. And seeing the doctor has made me wish . . . oh, it's too childish to talk about!"

"If you were really as old as you try to be," she said gently, "you'd know that it isn't ever childish to be serious about such things as that. On the contrary! And yet there was a time when you wanted me to think you were well over thirty. Why, Mr. Hilliard, you're a boy!" Nevertheless, she regarded him . . . not as one would regard a mere youth, but with appreciable more uncertainty.

Hilliard had flushed warmly.

"That was when I wanted you to think a good many things that weren't true."

"About you?" Her inflection was an invitation to further confidences, and it drew Hilliard incontinently along the path he had planned—and feared to take.

"Some of them," he admitted. "And some were about you. The fact is, I . . . I've come on a peculiar errand." He cleared his throat violently; his eyes suddenly adored her. "I've come to straighten all that out. Please don't imagine I've suddenly gone crazy or . . . or anything . . . and please don't take anything I say tonight to mean weakness . . . because, honestly, I've thought about this so much that it's rather disintegrated me . . . but I've got to tell you some things I don't want to." His shoulders squared in resolution; and at the look of pain in his eyes, of pain and despair, her whole womanliness went out to him—and had to be crushed, because she was, after all, a woman.

Her look to him was first of astonishment at his surrender, and, after that, of swift, inevitable pity for the unnamed forces which were influencing him. Womanliness hung in the balance; and then, in a flash of perfect comprehension of his plight, she knew that she could speak to him without reserve. He had passed beyond the bounds of conventionality; she put herself, mentally, at his side.

"If it hurts you to say it," she said, "I've known you've been . . . fond of me. How could I help it? And why shouldn't you have the right to think of it? Why shouldn't you have the right to be yourself? Why shouldn't you have the right to talk to me, and to expect me to hear you, and try to understand? You haven't thought that my father is the only one of us to do that, have you?" The reproof was exquisite.

"Ever since that day . . . the time you played to me," he said, "I've

been . . . I've been . . . fond of you. How could I help it? And why shouldn't you have the right to think of it? Why shouldn't you have the right to be yourself? Why shouldn't you have the right to talk to me, and to expect me to hear you, and try to understand? You haven't thought that my father is the only one of us to do that, have you?" The reproof was exquisite.

"Please do!" she said. "You were on the way to be interesting. Think out loud some more."

Hilliard glanced sharply at her. "Don't laugh at me!" he said, almost roughly. "For heaven's sake, don't you know that the one time you shouldn't laugh at a man is when he deserves it?"

Carol's attitude was vaguely less suggestive of ease.

"I wasn't laughing at you," she said, "truly. But what you said was so . . . so queer."

"Oh, yes." Hilliard's accent was very flat. "I suppose it was. It must have been . . . I always seem to be more or less up in the air when I come to see you, don't I? The last time we talked about friendship—"

"But that was at least a month ago," she said hastily, "and in the meantime, you've been just as nice and cheerful as anybody. I thought you were all over your troubles."

"Cheerfulness wasn't what you asked for," Hilliard swallowed hard. "I . . . I came up here, Miss Durant, to have a really serious talk with you . . . really serious. It's been delayed too long already. It took me two solid days to get my courage up to it. And . . . and now I'm here, I don't even know how to begin."

He scowled heavily into the vacant fireplace, and held out his palms with a mechanic gesture as though to warm them at an imaginary blaze. "You know," he said absently, "your father is a very extraordinary man—very."

The compliment to the doctor had its invariable effect upon her; she glowed under it.

"I've always known that . . . I'm glad you realize it, too."

He stood erect, and faced her. "I . . . it came to me, when I was talking to him, what a great privilege it must be for you to have his advice—and his sympathy . . . when you

need it. And there are so few—so incredibly few—people who make you feel like that. One in a thousand. Or, one in ten thousand. People who lift you clear of your trivial little self—and make you think in terms of principles, and not of your own selfish ideas—and still don't preach. . . . It must be a privilege."

"It isn't only for me," she said. "He has enough sympathy for anyone who asks for it. He isn't very worldly—you've noticed that? He can't believe that anybody, or anything, is really bad . . . and perhaps that's why people come to him so. Of course, it may be that just because he's my father, I—"

"No," Hilliard shook his head. "I've seen a good many fathers, and next to mine. . . . My own was a wonderful man, too, but I never appreciated him. And seeing the doctor has made me wish . . . oh, it's too childish to talk about!"

"If you were really as old as you try to be," she said gently, "you'd know that it isn't ever childish to be serious about such things as that. On the contrary! And yet there was a time when you wanted me to think you were well over thirty. Why, Mr. Hilliard, you're a boy!" Nevertheless, she regarded him . . . not as one would regard a mere youth, but with appreciable more uncertainty.

Hilliard had flushed warmly.

"That was when I wanted you to think a good many things that weren't true."

"About you?" Her inflection was an invitation to further confidences, and it drew Hilliard incontinently along the path he had planned—and feared to take.

"Some of them," he admitted. "And some were about you. The fact is, I . . . I've come on a peculiar errand." He cleared his throat violently; his eyes suddenly adored her. "I've come to straighten all that out. Please don't imagine I've suddenly gone crazy or . . . or anything . . . and please don't take anything I say tonight to mean weakness . . . because, honestly, I've thought about this so much that it's rather disintegrated me . . . but I've got to tell you some things I don't want to."

She sat motionless. Hilliard had turned back to the fireplace.

"Were you as bad . . . as that?" she whispered.

"Once," he said bitterly, over his shoulder, "I used to be a gentleman. But that was a long time ago."

She raised her head. "Nothing could ever make me believe," she said, "that you haven't always been just as I've known you—since July. Nothing can, and nothing will. What you may think about yourself makes no difference to me. I—"

"Don't!" he said, and his tone was agonized. "Don't you see—"

"I don't believe you," she said steadily.

Hilliard's voice was unstable with his great bitterness of failure. "You flatter me," he said harshly. "And besides—you're wrong."

She was up, and beside him, smiling bravely into his eyes, and he was flitting his will to keep his hungry arms from snatching her, from sweeping her close to him, and . . .

"What do you think women are?" she demanded, with sweet impetuosity.

"Nothing but marble statues—or putty ones? Just made to stand around and let the world go past, without having anything to say about it?"

He retreated to the wall in self-defense. "Don't! Don't! I'm the one who's driven myself into this corner—not you!"

"But you don't have to stay in it always, do you?"

He stared at her in mystification.

"Don't be silly," she said, "and don't be unreasonable; I'm not!" She touched his sleeve; his expression was unchanged. "Don't make me think you are unreasonable!" she said compassionately. "If you're not satisfied, why can't you make yourself what you want to be? Instead of brooding over the past, that you can't help, why don't you think about things you can help? Living is about all there is to live for, isn't it?"

He drew in his breath perniciously. "But I'm letting you go," he said, dazed.

She stamped her foot in tremulous severity. "You're not; I won't! Can't you see why? Do I have to tell you that? Well . . . because I want you for a friend even if you don't want me."

"Want you!" he cried, and remembered himself, and froze to immobility.

"Oh—as a friend!"

"Surely, as a friend—what else did you think I meant?"

The young man shook his head.

"I don't know. Only I came up here to tell you I haven't any right to your friendship. I can't tell you why . . . I haven't as much callousness as that . . . but if I did tell you, your last atom of faith in me would be gone. And you can't afford to have me even for a friend—now that I've said that, can you?"

"Yes," she said steadfastly, "I can afford it."

"When . . . when I've told you . . . His lips were parted in amazement, his eyes roved dully. "I can't understand . . . I'm telling you I'm not worth the powder to blow me to hades." He laughed oddly. "That's proved already, over and over again."

"Don't you understand?"

"Carol . . ." His voice broke. "Why, Carol . . . I'm not fit to talk to you."

That's proved, too. . . . I'm proving it now! I'm saying it—don't you hear me? I'm saying it now. And you—"

He put his hand to his forehead, and brushed back his hair, which was strangely wet. "I can't make it any plainer," he said, with helpless finality.

"No matter what's happened," she said earnestly, "I can't believe it isn't coming out all right. So if you'll just keep on living, and working, and trying . . . and . . ." Here her eyes were so appealing that his own dimmed to behold them. "And you haven't been so very dreadful after all, have you?"

Hilliard retreated once again, not trusting those hungry, lawless arms of his.

"I'm just wondering," he said, with a terrible smile, which was entirely devoid of mirth, "if a man happens to

library . . . and would come down directly. Indeed, he followed almost on the heels of the messenger.

"Why, hello, Hilliard," he said, rather stiltedly. "Did you want to see me? That's too bad—I've got to leave here in just a couple of seconds to catch my train. I'm going West tonight."

"I'll take you over," said Hilliard, shortly. "That'll save you a minute or two—and give us time to chat. My car's outside."

"Why—under the circumstances . . ." Armstrong's glance was diverted.

"I don't think I can let you do that—take me over, I mean. I'm going West on a business trip and I don't think it would be very appropriate for you to—"

"Oh—you are!" Hilliard felt streaks of ice coursing along his spine. "How far West?"

Armstrong consulted his watch nervously.

"Hilliard," he said, "I like to do things out in the open. There are just two reasons why I don't think you really want to invite me to ride down to the station with you. If I'm wrong, it's up to you to say so. One of 'em is that Rufus Waring has asked me to stop off at Butte—I'm going a good deal further than that—and look up some matters for him. I guess you know as well as I do what they are."

Hilliard fumbled his hat. "I see. And—the other reason?"

Armstrong suddenly straightened; and his voice had a curious ring to it—a ring which electrified Hilliard and awoke the most petrifying alarms within him.

"But does one ordinarily mention certain kinds of people—in a men's club? I don't know how it is where you come from—but here, we don't."

Hilliard smiled rapidly; it was the utmost perversity of emotion, for he knew now why Carol had been so explicit in her sympathy . . . why she had been so meticulous to let him realize that she wanted him as a friend; only as a friend . . . and here was Armstrong, concealing with difficulty the triumph he was hinting at.

"No," he said harshly. "One doesn't, but there isn't anything to keep us from mentioning anybody we like outside the club, is there?"

"Why—not that I—"