

Prairie Avenue

By Arthur Meeker

Synopsis: Ned Ramsay has promised his Aunt Lydia that he will try to persuade Sonny to give up his mistress and divorce plans. Almira is unaware of Sonny's infidelity. When Ned spends the week-end with them he finds their palatial summer home overrun with guests and returns to town without completing his mission. He and Celia (now a duchess on her first visit to Chicago since her marriage several years ago) are romancing while the duke is in Newport. Ned joins the Kennerly family and several guests to attend the American Derby. Sonny's mistress sees him and greets him much too warmly. Almira is escorted home by Ned. Sonny writes Ned he must see him at once. Now go on with the story.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE CHICAGO CLUB, which up to now Ned had known only in its rushed midday aspect, all cigar smoke and munching millionaires, was a desert this hot Sunday night. His host had made the gesture of ordering supper served in a private room, but there was no one about save the waiters and one or two regular residents. Old bachelor horns sunk deep in armchairs in the lounge, surrounded by papers that ought, one felt, to be yesterday's.

Sonny looked nervous but resolute as they came to table; as soon as the cherry-stone clams had been whisked away to give place to a mountainous platter of chicken salad he plunged into business.

"Lord, Ned, what a nasty mess! I don't know what you think of me, but I do know what I think of myself. Why, I'd give my right hand . . . but it's too late now. The fat's in the fire, I guess."

The whole story came out pell-mell, uncomplicated by excuses or attempts to disguise the ugliness of the facts. It was true that Sonny had a mistress. But it was not true that he wanted to divorce his wife in order to marry Daisy Branson.

"Lots of fellows in my position do what I've done. But I'm a Kennerly, so the whole world gets to hear about it. Perhaps you don't realize that Mira can't have any more children. I mean, haven't seen her since. I tried again this morning, but she still wouldn't let me in. All I can think of is Mira, and what I've done to her without meaning to."

years—better than anything else I've known—better, even, than I hoped it would be when we married. Mira's my anchor, my compass, my—everything, really. I'd rather die than distress her. Please believe me. It's the truth, as sure as I'm sitting here talking to you."

As Sonny paused to mop his brow the waiter appeared with iced coffee. The two young men held themselves in, staring straight ahead, unable to speak a word till the door had shut again. Then Ned said slowly: "I do believe you. But what are you going to do about Mira?"

Branson? That was all very well as long as Mira didn't know, but after what happened yesterday there's no use pretending—"

"By George, I can't imagine what happened to Daisy! She's never done a thing like that before. I suppose it was her brother's fault—if that bouncer was her brother. He was drunk as a lord, wasn't he? And I guess she'd been drinking, too. Oh, after this, she's got to go. Don't think I don't see. . . . If there was talk before, there'll be 10 times more now. The Maxwell's brake was right next to ours. Maud and Dan must've heard the whole thing. The only way to stop it is to make a clean break."

"Can you do that?"

"Of course I can! I don't care that for Daisy and she doesn't care that for me."

"Does Mira know what you plan to do?"

"I tried to tell her last night—but she wouldn't listen. The poor dear was awfully upset. She locked herself in her room—I have any more children. I mean, haven't seen her since. I tried again this morning, but she still wouldn't let me in. All I can think of is Mira, and what I've done to her without meaning to."

You've got to help me, Ned. That's why I had to see you tonight. You're closer to Mira than anyone else; you can say things to her that her own mother can't. Go to her tomorrow and tell her what I said. Tell her I care for her and no one but her—that I'd blow my brains out rather than cause her a moment's unhappiness. Tell her the business with Daisy is finished—that's no lie—it's as good as finished, for I'll never see the little fool again."

"Tell her—oh, anything you like, just as long as you can persuade her to take me back. You've got to stand by me now. You've always been my best friend. Why I owe everything to you—if it hadn't been for you, Mira never would've married me—I don't forget that. If you can save me this one more time, I'll be your debtor the rest of my life. You must do it, boy—there's nobody else on God's earth who can. Oh, Neddy, I care so much—so much!"

SONNY BURIED his face in his hands; when he looked up his black eyes were full of tears.

Ned felt painfully embarrassed as always in the presence of unrestrained emotion. These melodramatic recollections of the Regent Aunt Corinne had been wont to

make, but there was no mistaking the genuineness of the feeling that underlay them.

In the circumstances Ned felt justified in assuring his friend he would do what he could. "Mind you, I promise nothing." But he would talk to Almira and, if Sonny liked, to Aunt Lydia as well—explain the whole thing as best he was able. All he asked in return was that Sonny should engage to seek an immediate interview with Miss Branson and terminate their relations as he had already proposed to do.

Sonny was ready for anything, amazingly braced by Ned's calm assumption that matters were not past mending. He would get hold of Daisy tonight if he could, or at the latest tomorrow. Depend on it, Ned would have word in the course of the day.

The evening ended quite cheerfully.

Ned refused a lift home on the pretext of wanting a walk. When Sonny had left him he turned north to the Annex and asked for Celia. After a moment the maid's sleepy voice answered: Madame la Duchesse had gone out to dinner—no, she could not say where—no, it was impossible to tell when Madame was likely to re-enter.

Strangely downcast, he strolled

home along the avenue through the warm grey night. The air was so thick that it seemed to press in upon him, and so humid that even the stars had trouble in shining.

As Ned had expected, Aunt Lydia was waiting for him. She listened with narrowed eyes to his account of the dialogue, and when he had finished gave a long sigh.

"Thank you, my dear, you've managed splendidly; I couldn't ask for more. Let's hope Sonny means what he says. We must pray for the best, Ned; that's all we can do till tomorrow."

THE NEXT day, which was hotter than ever, Ned rang up the Annex as soon as he dared after breakfast. This time Madame de Longueon was at home. Her voice floated over the wire, cool, detached, and faintly amused. She quite understood about last night and only hoped he had been able to talk some sense into her wretched brother. To tell the truth, she had got back from the country in a state of fatigue so complete that she had gone straight to bed and taken supper on a tray. (The fib about dining out was freely confessed.)

"I'd forgotten how fearfully hot

it can be. How on earth do you stand it?"

She herself was not going to try very much longer; she would be leaving shortly to join her husband in Newport. Pierre had begun to get lonely; besides, they'd only a fortnight more in the States, and there were still so many places to go, people to see.

Ned felt her a thousand miles away instead of less than two. It seemed as if last week had never been. What was the use in pleading his suit? It was sheer obstinacy that made him refuse to accept his dismissal. She was booked today for both lunch and dinner; the best he could get was a promise to take tea with him tomorrow, if the weather improved.

He rang off with a feeling of utter frustration. It was the past all over again—how would one ever be sure of Celia?

The rest of the day he sat about aimlessly, waiting to hear from Sonny. He did not like to leave the house, for fear the call would come through in his absence. It grew hotter and hotter; the air seemed hard to breathe, exhausted as one imagined the atmosphere on the moon. Driven by a wicked wind from the southwest, a constant procession of clouds crossed the brazen and lustreless sky. The clouds were edged with violet, thunder rumbled ominously in the distance; but the storm refused to come nearer.

About the middle of the afternoon Sonny called to say he had had trouble in finding Daisy; they were to meet, however, in half an hour at her apartment and go for a drive in the park. "I'll just have time to settle things with her before dashing home to dress for dinner. If I don't call you again, you'll understand why—but don't worry, Ned; it'll be all right."

(To Be Continued)
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Prof. Diemer Named To Butler Faculty

Prof. James S. Diemer, Northwestern University faculty member and former teacher in Arizona State College, has been appointed assistant professor of English at Butler University, President M. O. Ross announced today.

Prof. Diemer will be in charge of the various Butler courses in American literature. He is a graduate of Stanford University and received his doctor of philosophy degree from Northwestern this year.

Underwriters to Meet

R. W. Osler, editor of Life Insurance Publications for the Rough Notes Inc., Indianapolis, will speak on "Democracy's First Line of Defense" before the opening Fall meeting Thursday of the Quincys, Ill., Association of Life Underwriters.

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