

THE AFFAIR OF THE LETTER

By GEORGE HYDE PRESTON.

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WALCOTT HARRISON, junior partner in the firm of James & Harrison, New York, extensive dealers in Mexican mines, was returning that afternoon from a business trip to Philadelphia.

He was in a hurry to get back, for his partner James had gone to Mexico on a deal, and a wire from him might come at any time.

As Harrison sat waiting for the train to start, a girl entered the car and took a seat on the opposite side and some distance from his. As she passed Harrison looked up. "A charming face," he commented to himself, and returned to his paper.

It had been a dull day in the market and there was not much in the Mexican news except a report of a big strike in the Con Amore mine hitherto considered an undesirable property. Harrison held a few shares of the stock which he had taken in a trade, but not enough to make the report more than mildly exciting, and he found himself glancing again at the girl.

"She looks troubled," he thought. "I suppose even pretty girls have their worries. I wonder what hers is." He smiled. Perhaps her dressmaker has disappointed her."

The train was under way now. The girl took a letter from the dainty leather bag which hung on her arm.

"Scotch granite paper," nodded Harrison approvingly. "I like that kind."

She read the letter through and he saw that she was breathing quickly.

"She must have an exciting correspondent," thought Harrison. "No! by Jove, she is sending it away!" he ejaculated as the girl took a stamp from her purse and affixed it to the envelope.

She put the letter back into her bag and sat looking listlessly out of the window, oblivious of her surroundings.

"I wonder why she did not seal it," thought Harrison. "I suppose she wants to read it again before she mails it. On the whole, I am glad I am not the man to whom the letter is going. I do not believe that it contains pleasant news for him. Perhaps it isn't a man though; but I think it is."

He tried to read, but found himself constantly wondering what was in the letter and glancing at the girl who sat looking so listlessly out of the window.

When the train was nearing Jersey City she roused herself, and taking the letter out, read it again. Then she thrust it back into the envelope which she sealed hurriedly. As the train pulled into the station she stood holding the letter in her hand, and it seemed to Harrison that there was a desperate look in her face when she turned to leave the car. Just as she reached the steps some one jostled against her and the letter fell out of her hand almost at Harrison's feet, with the addressed side up. He stooped to get it and there on the envelope, in plain letters that he could not help seeing, was his own name and office address.

For a moment he eyed the letter in speechless amazement, and then, quickly recovering himself, he picked it up as the girl turned.

"I think you dropped this," he said, holding it out.

"Yes, thank you," she murmured, taking it and looking at the letter rather than at him.

A moment more she was walking through the station, glancing about her uncertainly as she went. "She expects some one to meet her," thought Harrison. "What the deuce is she writing to me about?"

Suddenly the girl seemed to see what she was looking for, and walked quickly to a letter box in a corner of the station.

"She is going to post my letter!" ejaculated Harrison in suppressed excitement.

The girl lifted the iron flap of the box, and half inserting the letter in the slit, held it there and stared at it, her face a picture of contending emotions. Suddenly a flood of color surged into her cheeks. She snatched back the letter and fairly ran from the box. The iron flap came down with a bang that made Harrison jump.

"Confound it! I am nervous over a letter," he muttered impatiently. "What do I care whether she posts it or not? The first thing I know she will see me watching her."

But the girl had no eyes for him. She walked rapidly toward the ferry and went aboard the boat without a backward glance, and Harrison mechanically followed her.

As the craft sped across the busy North River she stood leaning against the rail looking vaguely back at the dying sunset. A pathetic picture of lone-

liness she seemed to Harrison, who took pains to stand where she could not see him watching her, though it appeared to be a needless precaution for she took no heed of her surroundings.

"Little girl," he ejaculated impulsively, "you are in some trouble, and I will help you out if you will only post that letter and give me half a chance!" Then he took another look at her as she leaned, slim and pretty against the rail.

"By Jove, Walcott Harrison! I half believe the girl has turned your head!" he murmured smiling whimsically.

The boat bunted its way into the slip on the New York side, the gates opened and the passengers crowded ashore, the girl among them, and Harrison following.

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"Why should I care whether she would or would not send an anonymous letter?" he asked himself. "But I do," he added; "I like to think that she is square."

As he turned again to his mail, Holmes, his chief clerk, came in from the outer office and said, "Mr. Harrison, a Miss Almore and a man giving his name as Black are waiting to see you."

"Why do you say 'giving his name as Black?'" asked Harrison sharply.

"Because I feel quite sure that he is Jake Derry, who got into Parr & Dunham out in Denver about three years ago to the tune of \$20,000 in a bold mining swindle. He vanished along with their money. It happened while I was out there."

Going into the outer room he beckoned to Holmes and held a whispered conversation with him. At the end of it Holmes nodded quietly, and Harrison returned to his private office. "Well, Miss Almore," he said, smiling, "it is something of a gamble, but if everything is as represented I don't know that I mind taking a chance." And sitting down at his desk he wrote a few words on a sheet of paper and passed it to her. The first step will be to sign this order on the Longfield Trust Company to deliver the stock to our firm on receiving from us \$1,000 for Mr.—er—Jenkins."

Harrison affected to consider. "Excuse me for a moment," he said. "Let me see what information we have in the office concerning the mine."

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The girl looked at the paper and hesitated. "It is all right, Miss Almore; sign it," said Black, and his words snapped like a whip.

The girl looked swiftly at him. His face was bland, but his eyes were cold as ice.

She signed the paper.

Harrison took it, and writing a check for \$16,000, called Holmes and said:

"Here is the order on the Longfield Trust Company in the Con Amore stock transaction, which I explained to you a few moments ago, Holmes, and here is my check for \$16,000. As soon as you have concluded this business bring the stock to me."

"Very well, sir," answered Holmes. "Here is a telegram which came a moment ago." And laying it on the desk, Holmes left the room.

Harrison opened the telegram. It was from his partner, James, and in their private code.

"If you and Mr. Black will excuse me," said Harrison, turning to Miss Almore, "I will decipher this wire while we are waiting for Holmes. Here is a morning paper if you care to see it."

She took the paper mechanically, and Harrison began to translate his telegram. The office was very still. Black watched the door nervously.

When Harrison had finished translating the wire, he read the result with a start of amazement and glanced swiftly at Black. Then he returned to the message again and was reading it through a second time when he was interrupted by a sharp cry, and starting up he saw Miss Almore gazing fixedly at the newspaper which he had handed her.

"What is the matter, Miss Almore?" he exclaimed.

"My brother," she gasped, pointing to the paper. "He is dead!"

As she spoke Black's face changed and he rose hastily. Harrison saw the motion and quickly walking across the room, stood before the door.

At this moment Miss Almore sprang forward impetuously and exclaimed: "Call back your clerk, Mr. Harrison! The loan is a pretense! I have not borrowed a penny! This man is Jenkins! He will get your \$16,000! All of it! The report of a strike is false. It was sent in by this man's confederate! The stock is worthless! We have defrauded you!"

In her excitement she seized Harrison's arm.

Black started toward her. "You must be crazy!" he exclaimed. "I—"

"Stand back there, Mr. Black!" ordered Harrison. "It will be better for you. Now, Miss Almore," he added, turning to her, "go on."

"We have defrauded you," she declared again.

"My brother had—had done wrong. This man held him in his power and threatened to expose him and send him to a Mexican prison unless I would do—what I have done. My brother was incurably ill. He was weak and despairing. He pleaded with me not to let him spend the last months of his life in prison. He was my only brother—hardly more than a boy—and I loved him—and so—I did this to save him. I am not trying to justify myself. I am only telling you why. He is free now. Do what you like with me."

There was silence in the room. Then Harrison looked at Black. "What have you to say?" he asked.

As he put the question there was a quick knock, and Holmes appeared in the door. "Here is the stock, sir," he said, and handing Harrison an open bunch of Con Amore certificates he went out and closed the door.

Black took a quick, triumphant glance at them, and turning to Harrison with an easy air of as-

surance, said: "You want to know what I have to say, do you? Well, I say this: You have the stock. I am going to the trust company for the money. If you relied for the value of the stock on a mere newspaper rumor, that is your lookout. The papers regarding the loan are duly executed and the trust company will recognize my right." Saying this, Black started toward the door.

"Just a moment, Mr. Black," retorted Harrison. "If you will look just a little closer at these Con Amore certificates you will see that they are not Miss Almore's at all. They are a few which I own myself. Holmes brought them in at the psychological moment, so to speak, at my request. The trust company still has Miss Almore's stock."

Black's face changed.

"Did you suppose, you scoundrel that you could take me in with such a clumsy trick?" went on Harrison hotly.

Black took up his hat with an insolent smile.

"Would you like to prosecute—us?" he asked.

"No," answered Harrison.

"I thought not," said Black savagely. "For protection there is nothing like having a charming—er—accomplice."

Harrison took a step toward him with clenched fist.

"Oh, don't trouble to see me to the door," said Black ironically. "Good morning."

"Just one moment before you go," returned Harrison in a voice as smooth as oil. "Miss Almore is entitled to her stock, Mr. Black, the loan being a mere pretense."

"Well, she won't get it," snapped Black.

"Oh, yes she will, Mr.—er—Derry."

The man looked up quickly and the expression on his face changed. "Oh, well, perhaps she is entitled to the stock," he said with a shrug.

"I thought that would be your conclusion," nodded Harrison, and turning to his desk he picked up the agreement which Black had handed him. "Now, Mr.—er—Jenkins, please write across this a release of all claims and an order to the Longfield Trust Company to deliver the note and the stock to Miss Almore."

Black complied without a word.

Harrison turned to the telephone and called up the trust company. "I have the trust company on the wire, Mr. Black," he said. "Kindly tell them in my presence what you have done so that there may be no mistake."

The man did so.

"Now," went on Harrison, opening the door, "there is just one more favor I will ask of you. Mr. Black. Kindly tell Mr. Jenkins that if he ever crosses my path again his name will be—Derry. Good morning."

The door closed, and Harrison turned to Miss Almore and said cheerfully: "I want to congratulate you on owning such a large block of Con Amore stock. The gentleman of the many names seems to have been something of a prophet without knowing it. The cipher telegram which I received a little while ago was from my partner who is in



"IT IS ALL RIGHT, MISS ALMORE; SIGN IT;" SAID BLACK.

He saw that she still had the letter in her hand. She stopped and bought an evening paper and then walked quickly to one of the cabs which stood waiting for a fare, and, saying something to the driver, which Harrison was too far away to hear, she got in. The door slammed and the cab drove rapidly away.

Harrison started forward with a half-formed idea of following her in another cab, and then suddenly checked himself with an exclamation, for there in the muddy gutter he saw the little gray envelope which he had looked at so often. He seized it eagerly. Yes, there it was, sealed, stamped, and addressed to him. She had dropped it when she got into the cab with her hands full of newspapers.

He looked down the street. The cab had disappeared.

"I can't return it to her this time," he declared to himself, "for I don't know where to find her."

He turned the letter over and over, and eyed it curiously. "What shall I do with it?" he demanded of himself. "I can't leave it here in the gutter for some one else to find. I can't return it to her. I might post it," he laughed. "What nonsense!" he argued. "It is addressed to me. It is my letter. I will open it. And, besides," he concluded weakly, "if I don't I shall never know who she is." The temptation of this last argument was irresistible. He tore open the envelope, unfolded the letter and read.

"Well, Mr. Black, what can I do for you?" he asked, turning to the man.

"Do you know anything of the Con Amore Mine, Mr. Harrison?" asked Black in a smooth, purring voice.

"Yes, in a general way. Not been a very productive proposition, has it?"

"Ah, but a big strike has just been made there," insinuated Black smoothly.