OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

STORY OF THE PALLID CHILD AND THE CRIPPLED HERO

ALSO OF THE MUCK RAKER, THE ACTRESS LADY, LIZZIE, THE MYSTERIOUS GENTLEMAN, AND THE PLUMBER

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By James Hopper

ONE simply had to be happy when the "Pallid Child" was about. So, when she learned to flutter down regularly from her little room at the top of "The Morgue," to the suite Second Floor Right Front, there to cheer the "Crippled Hero" with the daintiness of her presence and the tinkle of her chatter, the "Muck-Raker" took a discreet delight in the situation.

He had a habit, anyhow, this Muck-Raker, of taking delight in situations. Also a habit of nicknaming people and things which is what ails the first paragraph of this very faithful recital of very real events.

It was he who had given "The Pallid Child" her name. She was the "Pallid Child" because, beneath her very black and marceled hair, she had a wistful little face which was very white and which was in piquant contrast to the fluttering vivacity of her movements, and because, perhaps (this Muck-Raker being wicked at times), he thought her, maybe, not quite as much of a child as she seemed.

"The Morgue" was the "Apartment Hotel" in which they lived (or had rooms, not to exaggerate). It was "The Morgue" because it was all marble. The joke about this (each of the Muck-Raker's names held in its throat a secret chuckle) was that the marble was not marble.

The "Crippled Hero" was the "Crippled Hero" because he was not a hero. When first the Muck-Raker had met him, and pitying his loneliness had invited him to share his suite, he had been on the trail of a "story." The elevator boy mysteriously had "tipped" him about an army captain ruined for life by a shot through both hips on the charge up San Juan Hill. A few questions had spoiled the "story." The gray-eyed, handsome lad had been crippled, not at the battle of San Juan Hill, but merely in the battle of life. A cadet at West Point, three months before graduation, while practicing a difficult horseback feat at monkey drill he had been dashed against a wall.

Well, anyway, when the Pallid Child began to visit the Crippled Hero the Muck-Raker was delighted.

And in the front half of the double parlors, the Pallid Child sat upon the couch, her little shoes (with big bows) drawn up; and puffed daintily at a cigarette (gold tipped), and talked and talked (oh, how she did talk, that Pallid Child) in a continuous chirping, warbling stream, with little side movements of her head like a bird's.

And the Crippled Hero, erect in his wheeled chair, gazed at her, in a half-amused, half-approving manner, as one looks at a child playing, or at a sun-gleam in dark waters; at times he laughed a deep, bass laugh; there came into his eyes a gravity which was almost a concern.

After a while a change would come in the performance of the Muck-Raker in the inner parlor. The typewriter would stop with a clang, he would gather up the written sheets lying loose about the table and, thumping them into a compact whole, would place them in the drawer above his knees, then, putting a clean white legal-size upon the cylinder of the machine, he would sit there listening, his hands inert upon the keys, listening to the words flitting in, winged, through the curtains separating the two parlors.

Then "click-aty-click, click-aty-click" the typewriter would begin discreetly; "click-aty-click," "click-aty-bang" it went on with growing assurance (and shamelessness); "b-r-r-r-, bang, bang; click-atic-atic-bang; b-r-r-r—bang bang——"

And rising presently, the Muck-Raker would go into his bedroom at the rear of the apartment, and there, all by himself, would read the page whisked off the cylinder, and there, all by himself, would laugh his fool head off.

What he read was something like this:

"Do you swim? I'd just love to. I always wanted to swim. But my feet won't stay up. I tried at Atlantic City last year. Frank Halton was teaching me. Do you know him? From Washington. He's awfully sweet. But my feet wouldn't stay up; they just wouldn't. My sister Eva, she can swim. She can do anything—swim, play on the piano, anything. She's a sweet girl. You ought to know her. Doesn't smoke. Nope. Couldn't get her to. She plays for me often. On the Pianola. I'm passionately fond of music. Passionately. Good music, of course—I don't like ragtime and such cheap things. But I'm passioately fond of good music. I love The Red Mill. She can play The Sash Dance, too, with all the variations. Eight sharps, or flats, I forget which, it is. Do you know where they make the best candy in the world? It's in Washington. It's the Benjamin Franklin candy. Frank Halton sends me some every week. We're engaged. Oh, yes; we correspond regularly. I write every day, almost. Well, that candy is awfully rich. Once I ate some and it made me ill; it's so rich. My sister eats it. She can do anything, that girl. You should know her. She's awfully pretty—oh, much prettier than I am. Nope, she doesn't dance. A show girl. I wear long skirts. Chorus girls wear short skirts. Or tights. They're horrid. No, the tights. Some of the girls, too——"

The Muck-Raker, a-tiptoe, returned to his typewriter; again he listened to the words floating in between the portieres; again his machine clanged and clicked and whirred beneath his enthusiastic fingers.

"Oh, yes, he's a dear boy. Lives in Washington. No, Frank Halton, that's his name. You saw his picture the other day. Yes, in the locket. Oh, yes, we correspond regularly. Oh, of course, I forget sometimes. You must have heard of his father. Down in Washington. A big banker. Frank works in the bank. He hates it, too, poor boy. Guess it's good for him, though. He has an automobile, all his own. A big red one, carries—oh, sixteen people, I think. Mother thinks he's great. She's just in love with him, mother. Funny thing happened once. He was in Florida, and he wrote to me and invited me to come down. I wrote back I would go down with mother. And he never said another word about it. Wasn't that funny? I wonder if he didn't want mother to come. This summer, he's going on his father's ranch, in Texas. He has lots of horses. Mamma wants me to go. I just love horses, don't you?"

He was having a beautiful time, this Muck-Raker, and a useful time, too. For this Muck-Raker didn't mean to be a Muck-Raker all his life. He had dreams. He dreamed sometimes of writing a Novel. And very slyly, all of the time, he was gathering Material. Human material, which he labeled Documents No. 1, II, and III.

Anyway, as has been already set forth, the Muck-Raker was delighted with the situation.

But when, after a seven weeks' tour along the watersheds of the United States (it had been discovered that with their incorrigible prodigality, the American people were drinking up all the water of the United States; and calculated that at the present rate in a period of one thousand six hundred and thirty-five years and three months the inland navy of the United States would have to be sailing on another beverage, or not at all), the Muck-Raker, returning gladsomely to the Morgue, found the Pallid Child perched upon the right arm of the Crippled Hero's wheeled chair, her head rather close to his and her eyes very soft, he felt suddenly much of his contentment oozing out of him.

The trouble with the Muck-Raker is that, among many ascendants all moderately joyous and lusty and free, there slipped in, some time or other, one Ancestor with a grouch.

That evening, after the Pallid Child had gone (she had lingered long, very long, about that chair on wheels), the Muck-Raker spoke to the Crippled Hero. The ancestral lump of dough lay heavy in his soul; his sentences were kind, but long and grave (a bit sonorous, too). The Crippled Hero, very straight in his chair, almost as straight as when, in the past, he had stood at attention, a link in a long line of gray-clad cadets, listened silently. Several times his cheeks flushed darkly, his eyes became hard, and his mouth half opened; but he swallowed the words which might have come. And by the the time the Muck-Raker was ending, his voice was quite low, his face averted as though he were addressing the wall (a far-away wall), the Crippled Hero suddenly sank forward; his head went into his two hands. And after a while he said: "Do you realize, John, what it is to sit here all day long, when you are away, or you are working, to sit here all day long and listen to that cussed little clock up there?"

The Muck-Raker looked troubled.

"And she's like the sunshine," went on the poor Crippled Hero; "like a little beam of sun coming through a dark day."

The Muck-Raker admitted this. "But," he went on; "but—but—but." He coughed.

"And she's a dandy little girl," continued the Crippled Hero. "A crack-a-jack, John! Fit to be anything to any man, anything to any man, understand?"

But here the Muck-Raker demurred and shook his head with a worried and disapproving expression, and went out into his room, and returned with a roll of typewritten foolscap, and read Documents I and II and III, the documents of a birdlike little heart.

And finally, as the Muck-Raker, with absent-minded, growing gusto, was starting on Document IV, he said: "Enough, John, enough!"

Then, after a while: "I guess you're right, John. Yes, you're right, I'm afraid."

"You see," said the Muck-Raker, embarrassed and apologetic, and, as is apt to be the way with embarrassed and apologetic persons, talking a bit too much; "you see, she's just a little bird, a lightweight little bird; you simply couldn't, you simply couldn't—oh, well, you couldn't m-m—well, you couldn't——"

"I understand," said the Crippled Hero. "Go ahead and do your worst. I'll stand it."

So, the next day, when the Pallid Child had whirred in, and had curled herself upon the sofa, the Crippled Hero wheeled himself off to the back bedroom, and the Muck-Raker, passing a very cross face between the portieres, said:

"Say, Pallid Child, I've got to work, you know. I can't have you and the Crippled Hero chattering here all the time and work."

"Why, John," she said, sliding slowly off the couch; "why, John!" And she turned a bewildered little pale face toward him, and he nearly gave up.

But he didn't. Instead, he said: "And the Crippled Hero, you know, he wants some time to himself. (Lordie, but those Ancestral Qualities were indeed, unleavened bread, and very indigestible!) "You mustn't come here so much."

"Oh!" said the Pallid Child, landing on the floor with both high heels together. "Oh!"

"You mustn't come here at all, Pallid Child. When we want to see you, we'll call on you."

"Oh!" said the Pallid Child again, only this time it sounded more like "ooh!" and came from the depths of a vibrant little body. "Ooh!"

And very straight, her pale little nose pointing toward the ceiling, she swept out of the room; her garments somehow seemed to have taken on weight, a perpendicularity; they did not flutter; she was very majestic.

The Muck-Raker listened to the diminishing click of her heels down the tiled hall. He went back to his typewriter and banged out a line. He stopped to wipe his brow, which was very wet. Again he started bravely at the keys. But he was missing them, or, rather, missing those he aimed at. He stopped again, puzzled. His hands were trembling.

The Crippled Hero came wheeling from the depths of the apartment. He rolled by behind the back of the Muck-Raker, who did not turn, and went on into the front room, where he was very silent.

The Muck-Raker went back to his typewriter and pounded. The Crippled Hero had not moved; still he sat before the curtained window, gazing at his own vague and doleful reflection. The clock on the mantel ticked resoundingly.

It ticked thus, with its tactless, idiotic cheerfulness, for many days, this fat-faced, resonant little clock. The winter was passing into a blustering starch that kept the wheeled chair indoors at all hours. The Crippled Hero sat at the window. But he did not see the street; the window pane was a wall, an opaque wall, that drew back at him his own desolation. As for the Muck-Raker, he seemed more absent-minded every day; his hair seemed thinner.

One afternoon he stopped abruptly, with legs apart, before the Crippled Hero and said: "Gol darn it. I can't stand this any longer. Let's give a dinner."

They gave a dinner, that very night. A caterer from near by sent up a wagonload of good things, and silver and crystals, and snowy cloths and napkins, and little candles with red shades; the Muck-Raker used the telephone with intelligence and discretion, and at five o'clock he went upstairs himself and formally invited the Pallid Child, who looked at first very much surprised, then doubtful, then suddenly very eager and happy (there isn't an ounce of ability to resent in that Pallid Child; not an ounce!). And at eight o'clock they were all at the table—the Muck-Raker and the Crippled Hero and the two Star Men of the—well, of New York's brilliantest newspaper; and the Actress Lady (she had taken her daily walk around the Central Park reservoir earlier in the afternoon, in the driving rain, and now [so is industry rewarded] looked like a red rose washed in dew), and "the Military Lady," whose Captain husband was in the Philippines, and the Pallid Child.

But—alas!—when the jolly little dinner was over, and they had finished chatting over the coffee and the nuts, and the two Star Men had together escorted the Actress Lady to her apartment (they were both in love with her, hence this movement in concert) and had gone, and the Muck-Raker, with the self-sacrifice of the true host, had taken the Military Lady back to her home under the same roof, when all this had happened, the Muck-Raker, returning, found——

Found what?

He found the Pallid Child perched upon the right arm of the Crippled Hero's chair, just as he had found her a few weeks before, returning from his muck-raking trip.

When she had gone, they looked at each other long, this wise Muck-Raker and this foolish Crippled Hero. Then said the wise Muck-Raker: "It won't do, Crippled Hero; it won't do, will it?"

And the Crippled Hero echoed, rather desolately, but withal stanchly: "No, John, it won't do. I thought I could—could be—stronger. But I can't."

And again in the room which such a short time before had been filled with such joyous sound, there was heard the odiously complacent ticking of the heartless, fat-faced little clock.

It might be ticking yet, measuring off doleful and interminable minutes, had it not been for Lizzie, the Mysterious Gentleman, and the Man Who Smoked a Cigarette.

Lizzie was the housemaid who had charge of the floor on which was the apartment of the Muck-Raker and the Crippled Hero—a cheery, humming, buxom girl, with little eyes and humorous wrinkles and with a store of Celtic blarney which more than made up for her one small defect. This defect might be best suggested merely by telling the name which the Muck-Raker had given to her. The Muck-Raker called her "Sloppy Lizzie."

The Mysterious Gentleman had the apartment twin to the Muck-Raker's, separated from it by a long hall just the width of a corpulent dowager (no dowager ever came there, though). He was "the Mysterious Gentleman" because he had long spare white hair which he combed back in an interesting fashion, because he had been an actor and had a wife in an Insane Asylum.

The Man Who Smoked a Cigarette—well, he was A Plumber.

You see, the Mysterious Gentleman detested electric lights. He held a theory that the violet rays of an electric light stimulated the growth of certain bacteria within the pancreatic gland, thus causing auto-intoxication, and hence baldness (also earache). So he used only kerosene lamps.

Which meant that Lizzie had to clean lamps. Now, lamps are cleaned with rags. And when you have cleaned a lamp with a rag, you want to get rid of the rag. In the easiest way possible. The easiest way was to drop it into the Mysterious Gentleman's refrigerator. He didn't use ice, believing it highly unhygienic (being made of water).

Well, the refrigerator being, by this time, stuffed with oil-soaked rags, the Mysterious Gentleman moved away to another Morgue, and the Plumber came to repair the bath tub.

This Plumber smoked. Also he was a Union Man. So accustomed was he to drop everything at 5 p. m., that, when this significant hour struck this day, he not only dropped his work, but also his cigarette butt.

He dropped it neatly and expeditiously into the convenient refrigerator.

Which he closed, so that the chemical phenomenon starting immediately was a slow, smoldering, and secret, though effective one.

That same afternoon the elevator boy, taking down the Crippled Hero's wheeled chair for his turn in the square, jammed it between the cage and the shaft, breaking one of the wheels. So that for the day the Crippled Hero found himself pinned to his bed.

The Muck-Raker that evening went to a banquet of Publishers.

Now, isn't this an interesting situation?

At about one in the morning, the stubborn smolder within the ice box of the departed Mysterious Gentleman obtained the reward of its persistence and at last broke out, free and red.

At about 1.30 a. m., the sleeping inhabitants of the Morgue were awakened by a vague tumult, a shrill and persistent shouting, and hammer-beats on doors. They awoke and immediately found themselves in smoky halls, bumping against each other, then in an avalanche upon the stairs, and finally standing out in the street, unclothed in the sleet, gazing up at the impassive and cold facade of the building, out of some of the closed windows of which smoke was oozing like a greasy and unclean fog. Everyone thought everyone else had turned on the alarm; so that the firemen were not getting there very fast.

The Pallid Child, up in her little room on the top floor, had been the last one awakened. When she got to the stairs she could just see the last of the fluttering and ghostly human avalanche. She sped down after it nimbly. Her only thought was for the street, the clear-aired, wide-open street. But on the second floor she stopped abruptly, her hands upon her heart. She had thought suddenly of the Crippled Hero, immobilized there in his bedroom, in the depths of the apartment.

She stood there, a long moment it seemed, uncertain, limp with fright, longing for safety, then a resolve went through her in a blinding wave, and she plunged into the narrow hall between the two apartments.

Immediately she was driven back by a suffocating puff of smoke. She charged in again; this time with a crackle, a tongue of fire shot over her head through a transom of the vacated apartment. She retreated into the main hall. A whirlwind of hot black vapor followed her there. She ran upstairs.

She ran up several flights till the smoke was much thinner, then, going through to the front, stepped out upon the fire escape. A shout came from the fast-increasing group in the street below. "Don't jump!" cried a fat man, very proud of his self-possession.

She came down the escape, a slight fluttering and white little object. In the center of the facade, at each floor was a stone balcony. From balcony to balcony iron ladders diagonaled. She zigzagged down, pausing at each balcony; she was like a little white moth flying there against the wall. "Come on, lots of time!" roared the fat man reassuringly. But at the balcony of the second story she stopped, tried the window; and then her arm made a brusque movement, there was a tinkle of broken glass, and the stupefied throng saw her go through the gap, into the house again. She showed vaguely white within a moment, then disappeared ;a column of black smoke began to pour out heavily through the aperture.

"My God, she is crazy!" cried the cool fat man; "somebody ought to get her out. Where's the firemen?"

But the Pallid Child was not crazy; she was simply the prey of a fine frenzy; without hesitating, she charged into the depths of the apartment, toward the room in the rear, where her vision showed her the Crippled Hero, chained. She went through the front parlor, sprang through the second (upsetting a typewriter), and reached the narrow bath room between the two sleeping chambers. But there, a huge hand seemed to flatten itself flaccidly and hermetically over her nostrils, over her mouth; a huge, soft, black, inexorable hand. Her lungs made a tremendous effort for air, failed; a velvet cloak fell about her head—and with the last shred of her strength she staggered back, stumbled across the front rooms, and fell across the window sill. With her head out through the window pane, she drank long draughts of air, like a hunted stag drinking from a lake, slowly strength returned, and with it the realization of what she had to do.

Taking a last big breath of the blessed air, she made another rush for the room in the rear. But this time she had not reached the bath room when the smoke hand, seizing her by the throat, forced her, staggering, back to the window.

There was a pitcher of water upon the table. She seized it, then snatched a long scarf from the mantelpiece (bang! went the little clock to the floor, and went on ticking with its idiotic cheerfulness). She soaked the scarf in the water and tied it over her nose and mouth. Then taking her direction carefully, she shut her eyes and made another rush into the smoke depths.

It was a groping, blind charge it seemed long and she was losing sense of direction when at last, like a blessing, she felt to right and left the walls of the narrow bath room. She brought up against an obstacle. It was the door. She opened it. She was within the room.

Here the smoke was a little less thick. She closed the door behind her and made for the bed. In the suffocating darkness her two hands met two other hands. These were limp.

She pushed her arms beneath him, and raised him up against her bosom; carrying him, she opened the door and staggered out.

But the smoke now, as if in a frenzy at being cheated, eddied about her in a mad whirl as of a myriad carrion birds; again, heavy and flaccid, the Hand placed itself upon her mouth. She went on one step, two steps, then fell, with her burden.

Close to the floor there, though, there was a remnant of air. She crawled on alone, to the window, took three long life-saving gulps, then crawled back, seized two outstretched hands, and, pulling madly, drew the unconscious form toward her. She laid it across the sill, head in the air, then drawing it up against her again, stepped out with it upon the balcony.

By this time the firemen were arriving slowly over the ice-smooth streets; Policeman Mulcahy, who had been delayed slightly by an interesting anecdote told too interestingly and completely in Patrick Donlan's cafe, was running up the fire escape, and the Muck-Raker (returning from the banquet), the Actress Lady (returning from the theater), and the two Sun men (looking for trouble) were meeting nose to nose, very much excited.

They were just in time to see a very pretty picture; upon the second-floor balcony, the Pallid Child, in a white garment like an angel's, leaning back against the wall with head drooping like a tired lily's, holding in her arms, as if it were a baby's, the limp form of the Crippled Hero.

Here, it must be said, at the risk of an anticlimax, that, if there is no smoke ever without a fire, this was an awful lot of smoke about a mighty small fire.

It was a smudge, more than a fire, and was rapidly put out by the brave firemen.

"Tick-atick-atick, r-r-r; tick-atick-r-r-r" went the typewriter of the Muck-Raker in the inside parlor.

"Why did you do it?" said the Crippled Hero to the Pallid Child.

He was in his wheeled chair and she was on the sofa. The chair was uncompromisingly facing her, and his gray eyes rested upon her in soft, luminous, but stubborn inquisition.

The room, by the way, was marvelously clean, much cleaner than Lizzie had ever had it. You could see that firemen had passed through here.

"Tick-atick-atick—r-r-r-r-roo," went the typewriter; "tick-atick-atick-r-r-r-roo."

"Why did you do it?" repeated the Crippled Hero. His eyes were very soft and very insistent.

"Oh," said the Pallid Child (and she wasn't telling the truth, that bad Pallid Child); "oh, I don't know." (Maybe, after all, she didn't know; who can tell?) "I knew you were in there; and that John (the Muck-Raker) was out; and that your chair was broken. The elevator boy had told me the chair was broken. He's an awfully nice elevator boy, isn't he? The other day, when I was going to leave town, he took my trunk down—and do you know, he wouldn't take any tip; no, sir, not one cent. I was going to Texas. But I didn't go. Mamma wants me to go. I changed my mind. Mamma, she says I'm always changing my mind. But I don't. Not near as much as she thinks. Now, sister, she——"

"Why did you do it?" repeated the Crippled Hero, calmly and evenly. The eyes of the Pallid Child dilated with a weary, haunted, persecuted look; her lips pursed in a pout and, pouting, began to tremble.

But she caught herself sharply. "Oh, you will keep on asking such questions!" she said. "I don't know. I just came down, ran down, and then I happened to remember you were there. The elevator boy had told me John had gone to a banquet. He makes speeches at banquets, doesn't he? He's awfully clever. It must be hard to get up and speak before lots of people. Especially when they're all eating, I should think. Once I made a speech. When I was at the convent. A little bit of a girl. I——"

"Why did you do it?" repeated that very inexorable Crippled Hero.

Again the Pallid Child's eyes went wide with a haunted look, and her lips began to tremble. But this time the eyes kept on going wider and wider, and the lips kept on trembling, and suddenly she had slid off the sofa, to her knees on the floor, and she was sobbing there, her head in her arms, against the wheeled chair, sobbing as if her heart would break.

"Oh," she said between sobs; "oh, I don't—I don't want to marry—I don't want to marry Mr. Halton—ooh—ooh—ooh!"

The Crippled Hero's right hand laid itself upon the little head, shaking there beneath him; his eyes rested upon it, upon the palpitating little body below, and poured about them a luminous tenderness; and his voice had a grave resonance that filled the room.

"Well, you won't have to, little Pallid Child," he said soothingly; "us won't have to, bless us ones!"

"Tick" went the typewriter behind the portieres, stopping abruptly. There was the sound of a door discreetly opened, discreetly shut; the Crippled Hero and the Pallid Child were alone in the apartment.

"Actress Lady," said the Muck-Raker, "I'm getting bald, I'm lonely, I want a home. Will you give Johnnie a home?"

The Actress Lady looked at him long, and searchingly (and tenderly).

"Muck-Raker," she said, "I don't think you're ready for a home. Maybe you're meant to get bald, and get bald alone. You're moved, I fear, mostly by a spirit of emulation. The kiddies in the front room have started you sentimentalising."

She stopped a moment, looking far away.

"But," she went on; "you think it over. Go away and think it over for—for six months. Then, perhaps, if still——"

"I'll be walking in a year," the Crippled Hero was saying.

"Of course you will," said the Pallid Child; "and meanwhile, when we go out, I'll wheel your chair. Because I am very strong. Ain't I strong?"

By the way, the little clock on the mantel did not tick any more. A zealous fireman had hit its face with an ax. It looked, now, like a German student after a duel.

THE PALLID CHILD SAT UPON THE COUCH AND PUFFED DAINTILY AT A CIGARETTE.