

ASHES of DESIRE

by
James Hopper



MAN sat at the black desk of his darkened study. From a lamp hanging above and behind him, a rosy ray of light fell upon a round polished spot set like a chip in the center of his head. A small scimitar of burnished metal was in his right hand; with it he had slit the envelope of the communication he was reading. It could hardly be termed a letter. Two weeks before, his university class had celebrated with a banquet the twenty-first anniversary of its graduation. Being far, and not able to go, and yet seized by a nostalgic pang for vanished days, he had despatched a fraternal greeting. The answer was with him now; at the champagne, upon a card making the round of the shining table, each, in turn, had written his or her name.

He counted these, first. There were just thirty-four. Twenty-one years before, there had been two hundred. This simple comparison seemed to throw him into a rueful reverie; twice, hesitatingly, his hand rose and touched the small bald spot like a chip upon his head. He began to work down the list, pausing a moment at each name.

Some told him nothing. They were as colors in the night, a sound fallen into vacuum. Some moved him vaguely. They were as a dimly remembered taste; or the reflection of a far flame, made faint by distance and by haze.

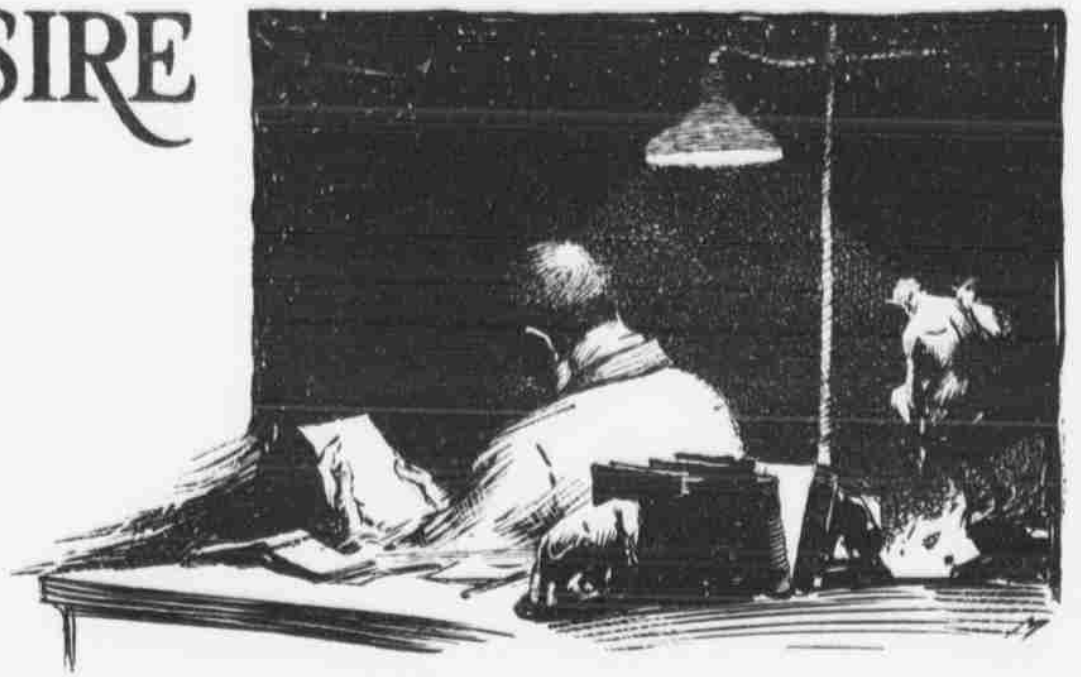
Others called up pictures clear but incomplete. A linear profile, a trick of mobile features, a head without its face, a face without its eyes. What tantalized him was that he could not recall the voices.

But suddenly his eyes lowered sharply toward the card.

Mrs. Carlton Coolidge (Ruth Anderson).

Long and with an ardent concentration, he scrutinized the little purple letters. He wanted to see if they had trembled. When he raised his head again, the air went hissing out of his lungs. He found that through his long examining he had held his breath. Also, he shook a little, so that he could not tell if the name trembled. Looking straight at the wall, he saw vividly a golden land, silver-hazed, by a sea astoundingly blue. And alone in this land, a girl slight and wistful, with a mouth that laughed and eyes that were sad, and hair like yellow sun.

HIS glance now fell to the floor and through it, into an abyss of doubt which replied to his questioning only with fluid, hueless and impalpable stirrings. Finally, unanswered, he took a sheet of paper and began to write,



the pen leaping into action, as though long in waiting and long prepared for this adventuring.

"Ruth Anderson—Today there came to me the card of the class, and for the first time in twenty years I am gazing upon your name in your own handwriting. Had I a microscope, I would search it. For with age I am becoming more and more a searcher—and one who is less and less answered. But it is not only your name I see (in its significant parenthesis). Again, today, you stand before me, frail gold in the huge gold land. And a question is again restive within me; one which has tormented me long and increasingly with the years; and which now is almost a torture, and which you alone can answer.

"TO ASK it, I must go back twenty years—to the time of our friendship, to the time of its fulness. For many months it had been absorbing sun and dew. Gradually it had swollen with honeyed ripeness, till it was very heavy, and burdened us at times—in the long silences of the yellow hill, when to our ears came only a low and ambient hum which was as the patter of imponderable sunshine, when to our eyes, ceasing to note the blue of the sea, swam a golden effulgence which came we knew not whether, from the land or from our souls—with sudden and inexplicable desires to weep. I ask you to go back to that time—to our last evening together.

"You remember? We were on the cliffs at twilight. The day had been a bubble; as flawless and flint-tinted and perfect, but also as fragile; tremulous with an iridescent agitation like a subtle fear. Over the sea, flashing saffron at noon, a grayness was spreading like a pall of ashes; and the clouds, enflamed a moment before with so generous a splendor, now were dead; dull and inert, they came flap-

ping toward us on bat-hued wings. They were silent, but in the gesture of their flight there was something evocative of screeches and lamentations. I felt suddenly your shoulder very close to mine.

"Why this emotion of Nature? Was our Fate, then being determined, of universal importance? Why not, Ruth Anderson? Are we not one with the All, flesh of its flesh, fibre of its fibres, atom of its atoms, intertwined imperishably with its pains and its joys? Perhaps, that night, was the Cosmos troubled with a pensive sense of mistake and failure; as troubled as if, watching with its sad eye the void, it should have seen passing, inexorably divergent through some slip of the celestial machinery two flaming stars avid for each other.

"But this is not what I would ask. I am approaching, searching, toward the question. We went in afterward. Side by side we sat before the fire, and looked into it as at something enchanting. Such a flame as with prodigal magnificence we lit then in that land.

"Hours slipped by. At far intervals, like a bell striking the flowing of time, one of us said a word, which reverberated long—like a bell. We had by then little need of speech. For the rare, the wondrous fact about our friendship, Ruth Anderson, was that we communicated. From the first, with a strange thrill, I discovered it; and this thrill now is the precious pearl of my memory. The happiness of communion!

"At midnight, I half-rose and said that I must go. For a moment my fate trembled on the invisible balance. Then you said: 'Stay.' And I remained, gazing by your side into the fire. Twice again I said that I should go, and twice you said: 'Stay.' And the night was passing toward the morning. It was, I think, the three notes of a meadow-lark which stiffened me to departure. They had in them, already, the tinkling dewdrops of day. I arose. Then was the moment of which I would question you; the instant of fleeing eternity upon which many times since, and long, and hauntedly, I have bent in search and examination, and puzzling surmise, and passionate interrogation.

"YOU were standing, slight and straight, near me. I made a motion—prosaic as to intent (it was toward my hat!) and how small, and yet with what ineffable result. In the movement I felt against my cheek the passing caress of your hair's loosened gold. On the instant, with a surge as sudden and compelling as the rise of the ocean to the heave of a catastrophic earthquake, there welled through me a tremendous impulse, seizing as it passed my every vein, nerve and fibre. I wanted to press you to me. To catch you in my arms and draw you slowly to me in a movement regular, resistless and fatal; then to crush you against me, my lips on your eyes, your sad eyes; on your mouth, your merry mouth; in a spasm to crush you, till you sank into my being and through the room your perfume would reel, the essence of your possessed soul.

"So strong was this impulse, Ruth Anderson, that even now as I write these lines, to the reawakened ghost of it my heart is still; for the time of several beats remains absolutely still, while in my mouth I feel my (Continued on Page 14)



Villanelle of Washington Square

By WALTER ADOLF ROBERTS

The starshine on the Arch is silver white;
Elves, April elves, are dancing in the Square;
The green-robed Spring has come to town tonight.

Jasmines are in her arms, and clouded quite
With lilac is the nimbus of her hair;
The starshine on the Arch is silver white.

With sap at floodtide and pale leaves bedight,
Ghosts of gray trees assume a vernal air;
The green-robed Spring has come to town tonight.

Young lovers' lips seek out the old delight
On the park bench that winter-long was bare—
The starshine on the Arch is silver white—

And they who hear her primal call aright
Rejoice that, deathless, virginal and fair,
The green-robed Spring has come to town tonight.

Dreamers whose windows on the Square are bright,
Know that your dreams may not with this compare:
The starshine on the Arch is silver white,
The green-robed Spring has come to town tonight.